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BLUE PETE, UNOFFICIALLY

THE STORY:

Into Medicine Hat, just before the year's big beef roundup, drift four cow-punchers from across the Border. Everything about Slick Jordan, their leader, stamps him as a dude, except the way he whirls a rope and handles his steel-dust broncho. When Jordan singles out Blue Pete for his attention, Inspector Barker, of the Mounted Police, has a hunch that trouble is about to follow in the wake of the newcomers.

He learns how right his hunch was when Sergeant Mahon, Blue Pete's friend, reports on the strange happenings that delay the roundup.

Blue Pete finds his time fully occupied keeping check on Jordan and his companions, who have hired out to the T-Inverted R and promptly ran foul of its foreman, Tully Mason. Secret attempts at murder and covert rustling across the Border step up the tempo of this new story in which the popular Blue Pete again proves that he can think faster than the next man, and that for him, at least, the dark expanse of the Cypress Hills holds no secrets.

By the same Author

BLUE PETE WORKS ALONE
BLUE PETE AND THE PINTO
BLUE PETE TO THE RESCUE

BLUE PETE, UNOFFICIALLY

By
LUKE ALLAN

HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
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*All the characters in this book are purely imaginary and
have no relation whatsoever to any living person.*

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CHAPTER I

THE INSPECTOR INVESTIGATES

INSPECTOR BARKER, of the Medicine Hat Detachment of the Mounted Police, ran a long-fingered hand through his short-cropped greying hair and scowled at the report he was preparing for the superintendent at Lethbridge.

"Why the blazes do I have to go through this rigmarole every week," he growled, half aloud, "whether anything happens or not? As usual there's nothing to report, yet I have to spend an hour or two telling the supe. so. And," he added, in a louder tone, "telling him with my own pen. When they make us do this they should at least furnish a typewriter." He raised his eyes and focused inattentively on a pair of flies buzzing against the dirty window-pane before him. "Only then I'd have to learn to use the dashed thing."

The outburst failed to relieve his feelings, and he shuffled dangerously in the swivel chair that would have ejected anyone less familiar with its infirmities. The superintendent had once tried to sit in that chair, and a new one had been promised. But like so many promises that one was never kept. If it had been, the inspector would have handed the new chair over to one of his staff. One doesn't discard an old friend like that, a friend that had served him for twenty years; that had supported him in the delivery of a million orders, of hundreds of condemnations and acquittals as local magistrate. It had come to stand as a badge of office. Without it the shabby room in the shabby barracks would have lost dignity.

With an explosive grunt he picked up the sheet and held it between his eyes and the window while he read aloud what he had written.

His mind wandered, however, and the sheet fell slowly away. But the window remained straight before him, and the

focus of his eyes passed beyond the noisy flies. It moved away across the railway tracks to South Railway Street.

The inspector had found that window, dirty as it almost always was, the most useful part of the barracks equipment. All these years of his service it had broadened that service. Through the window, without so much as moving his head, he could see all of Medicine Hat worth seeing—though it would not have done to tell the city that, the city fathers or *The Times*. Straight out before him, across the railway, Main Street stretched away to its diminishing lines at the top of the cutbank—which was the southern edge of the city. Immediately across the tracks was the other main street, South Railway Street. And little was apt to happen elsewhere within the hollow where nestled the Western city.

Main Street was the main street, of course, with most of the stores, the City Hall, and the Men's Club at the corner of Fourth Avenue. South Railway Street, measured by the number of pedestrians who used it, was busier, a centre of throbbing activity. For along its south side, where was the pavement, were all but one of the city's hotels—of which the bars were really all that mattered. For Medicine Hat was a cow town.

And so, merely by raising his head, he could keep his eye on the life of the city.

Doctors had warned him of the danger of facing the light, but the inspector had never yet discovered any use for a doctor, except to treat a gun or knife wound, or a broken limb—and even in these emergencies he had had sufficient personal experience to know other treatments available to anyone with a head.

As he looked now, the paper fluttered unheeded from his hand, and for a full minute he sat motionless, leaning forward, a slight frown wrinkling his forehead.

Suddenly he reached to the button beneath the desk, and outside in the hall a bell rang sharply.

Almost instantly hurrying footsteps approached the door and someone knocked.

"Come in."

A constable entered, plainly flustered by the tone of his superior's voice.

"What's going on out there in front of the Commercial Hotel, Langley?" the inspector demanded without moving his eyes from the window.

Constable Langley, the newest member of the Force, came nearer and leaned over the desk to look through the window. "Looks like someone selling something, sir—or something. . . . No, they're cowboys—three or four of them."

"I can see that as well as you can," snapped the inspector. "But cowboys don't stop on an empty street to sell anyone anything . . . and it's not a fight . . . and no one appears to be drunk. . . . The crowd's growing, too. Where's Sergeant Mahon? Send him in."

"Sergeant Mahon hasn't come back yet, sir. You sent him to Turner's Crossing yesterday."

"Yes, of course, of course. But he should be back by this time. . . . Oh, well, never mind. I'll take a look myself. I don't see a city policeman. Oh yes, there's Rankin . . . doing nothing, as usual, to keep the street clear. I suppose it doesn't call for interference. I'll leave it to him."

He bent determinedly over the letter he had written, and Langley left the room. Out in the hall the latter grinned and winked at nothing in particular. And for a moment or two he stood holding his breath, his ears turned towards the office he had left.

He knew Inspector Barker, could have foretold almost to a breath what was about to happen. The inspector had not yet moved, for the chair had not given the telltale creak that was warning to anyone within the barracks. He would still be crouched over that letter, frowning at it—not seeing it—concentrating on forgetting what was going on out there on South Railway Street, and in the very concentration rendering forgetfulness impossible. It was his business to be curious.

On tiptoes Langley moved away to his desk and seated himself, still smiling, waiting.

And beyond the closed door Inspector Barker jerked precariously about in the rickety swivel chair, muttering an oath, and heaved himself to his feet. First of all he planted himself before a small mirror on the wall while he adjusted his high-necked tunic, twisted each side of his stiffly waxed moustache

to a dagger point, and smoothed back his hair. From a nail beside the mirror he took his cap, from another nail a riding-crop. The latter he slapped against the side of his riding-boots as if inaugurating complete official dignity.

That was routine before appearing on the street. In his office he was apt to loosen the tight neck of his tunic—even on hot days to remove the garment—and mental divagations were apt to be marked by much rumpling of hair. The sharp clap of the riding-crop seemed to stiffen his backbone, reminding him that outside the barracks at least he was the senior police official of the entire district, an official who sooner or later might have to pass judgment on anyone, on anything that happened.

With his hand on the door-knob he hesitated. He knew what was in Langley's mind as well as if the constable had told him—as clearly as Langley knew what was in his superior's mind. Langley would be listening, would have heard the chair creak, would have followed every sound, and it shocked the inspector to realize that his subordinate had all the time known what he would do.

There was no way out of it now, however, and with a harsh clearing of the throat he jerked the door open and passed into the hall.

Langley rose immediately, trying to appear surprised, but failing.

The inspector scowled. "When Sergeant Mahon comes in tell him I've gone for a walk. He's to go out immediately and see what's going on over there on South Railway Street."

He knew that he had deceived no one, not even himself, and he shrank before the picture of the inspector of the local detachment sinking to such tawdry subterfuge before the youngest member of his staff—and utterly failing to deceive him.

But he had to go on with it now. So that when he walked across the front of the barracks and reached Main Street he hesitated, looking away towards the north for a few moments, as if contemplating setting off in that direction. Langley would not be able to see, but that must not be permitted to affect the rôle. No one ever went north from the barracks except to the hospital. In that direction lay nothing else, except

the defunct woollen mills, and the bend in the South Saskatchewan that skirted the base of the northern cutbank. Elsewhere was only low, shrub-covered flats, and far to the east a few cheap houses occupied by foreigners.

Ashamed of himself, he wheeled and struck determinedly across the railway tracks. Immediately he was on South Railway Street. By that time the crowd had grown until it blocked the street, but he stubbornly refused even to look towards it.

He was glad of a distraction. A long freight train was sliding down the cutbank to the west, brakes shrieking, and as he reached the other side of the tracks it reached the long bridge across the river, and the thunder of its passing drowned out the laughter he had heard from the crowd and furnished an excuse for looking in the other direction.

If he had hoped to escape detection he was disappointed. Already he had counted four cowboys in the heart of the crowd, had picked out their leader, almost drowned in a huge white sombrero. And now that young upstart had the presumption to beckon to him.

He ignored it, keeping on stolidly across the corner and disappearing beyond Drinnan's store.

He knew only in part what had happened then. The cowboy shrugged and made a grimace. Then with a rueful smile he said: "It's always the way: I can't interest anyone but you fellows who have nothing to do but look for something to amuse you. Ah, me!" He sighed. "Oh, well, I suppose a mere cipher from across the Border can't hope to draw the attention of the famous Mounted Police. I'm not a big enough crook for that. But then," he added, with a grin, "I suppose I might hold up one of your banks—or shoot a redcoat—if I can get a bead on him in time. I understand they're pretty slick with a gat themselves."

The crowd guffawed; it was enjoying itself. The cowboy's grin was infectious, and he was too good-looking and virile to arouse resentment, no matter what he said.

He and his friends had not dismounted. Leaning towards the crowd, he cupped a hand beside his mouth. "Just the same I'll wager this stetson of mine he's wondering who I am and

what I'm doing here. I'll wager he hasn't gone far beyond that corner. I may have come a long way but I've heard enough about your Mounted Police to be willing to bet this saddle that before the sun sets he'll have my record from the time of my first spanking."

He stopped and removed his sombrero, to stare into it with a frown. "A great gambler, ain't I—when no one can take me up. So, friends, let's call all bets off and get on with the business. And the business in hand is showing you Western Canadians what fools we produce across the Border. I'm going to——"

Inspector Barker had heard enough of it, for the cowboy's voice echoed back to him from the walls of the Royal Hotel on the other corner across Main Street, and the inspector's hearing was keen. Its keenness had sometimes been a source of embarrassment, though a hundred times it had saved his life—and had added to the prison population. Nothing the cowboy had said was offensive, yet there was something about it that induced the inspector to turn in at the lane behind Drinnan's store and open the back door.

He did not know what he planned to do, but he did know he wished to know more about that cowboy and what was going on out there. The crowd might be left to the attentions of the local police, although legally the Mounted Police had authority anywhere in the West. They had made it a rule, however, to interfere as little as possible with town affairs, since it was only natural that the town police would resent it.

As he opened the back door of the store, a young man turned from the show window.

"Oh, hello, Inspector! Lots of fun out here."

"What's going on, anyway, Larry?"

The clerk laughed. "Oh, just a new bunch of cowboys. They're lots of fun. They're doing tricks and things—stunts."

"I think they *are* new," agreed the inspector. "I've never seen them before. Stunts, you say? What do you mean?"

"They've just started. I haven't been watching long. Old man Shipley, the sheep-man, you know, was in for his month's supplies, and I couldn't leave him. But that chap in the big

white stetson sure can handle the gab. He's been putting it over thirteen to the dozen. Things he's been doing with his hands . . . I can't see exactly from here—not all of it—but the crowd's been laughing fit to bust." He settled down close to the glass. "I hope nobody comes in. We don't have street shows in the Hat very often, do we? . . . I suppose they'll take up a collection later."

Inspector Barker went to the window and stood beside the clerk. "Mind if I watch too?"

"Go ahead. I can get you a chair if you want one."

"No, thanks. This will be all right. I won't stay long. As you say, we don't have street shows in the Hat."

Larry laughed. "The shows we have are usually something to duck, something for the police." He moved to give the inspector more room. "I haven't been in the West long enough not to be interested in everything."

"And I," declared the inspector, "have been here so long that I, too, am interested in everything."

Larry looked a little puzzled but said nothing. After a few moments he said: "What beats me is what they find worth their while in a town like the Hat, for the things they do. They can't make much out of it—not worth their while."

A slight smile appeared on the inspector's face and was gone almost instantly. "One never knows—about these things. . . . But, Larry, nothing happens in the West without a meaning. That's what gives us our work. You'll learn about that when you've been here longer."

"I suppose I will," murmured the clerk vaguely.

CHAPTER II

THE STREET SHOW

THE CROWD had grown until only a narrow lane was left for traffic, and even that was rapidly filling. And still the solitary policeman in sight made no move. Inspector Barker, however, had long since ceased to notice that.

In the scene was far too much of interest to leave room for such a minor infraction of the local laws. The four cowboys who centred the throng were all well mounted, but it was the broncho of the leader that drew and held his attention. It was a steel-dust broncho, a beautiful animal. Only once before had he seen one, and that was between the knees of a southern cowboy who had assisted in driving up a herd of longhorns from Texas fifteen years ago. Some of the herd had broken away and had found their way into Canada from Montana, to be pursued by the cowboys, one mounted on an animal that had since been a dream of the inspector's.

So interested was he at the time that he had delved into the origin of the steel-dust. He learned that it was a distinct breed, a pure Arabian crossed with a mustang. The result was something to make the eyes of a horse-lover bulge with envy, a spirited, tough, very fast, beautiful, powerful and enduring creature with all the virtues of both parents and seemingly none of their faults. The speed and beauty came from the Arabian side, the endurance and spirits from the wild horse.

Nevertheless, enamoured as he had been at the time, the animal now out on South Railway Street was even finer to look at. It was a chestnut, with distinct spots of a lighter hue over the flanks. Its large eyes looked out calmly but with infinite intelligence and dignity from a small head that was held on a high arched neck. Its mane was parted to fall on both sides of the neck, dropping almost to its knees.

A show horse, but so much more, and a connoisseur like the inspector could pick out every mark of perfection at a glance.

Larry, too, was impressed. "Some bronc, eh, that?"

The inspector winced. "That's not a broncho as we know them. It's so much more than that. You never saw a broncho to compare with it. . . . I'd give a year's pay to have one like it."

He had not known that he spoke aloud, but the clerk winked and grinned. "Surely you can work up some sort of charge against him and swipe it."

"It's a temptation," admitted the inspector with a laugh. Then the laugh faded into a scowl. "Why the devil does he cheapen it all with that decoration? That's a crime."

In a way he was right. Such an animal required no dressing, was, indeed, cheapened by it. The saddle alone was worth a herd of bronchos. Cowboys make much of their saddles, sometimes sinking all their spare money into them. The inspector was accustomed to that, but he had never seen anything before like the one that shocked him as a distraction from the beauties of the animal it covered. Brightly polished silver studs formed an elaborate pattern over every inch not concealed by the rider's legs, and it was to be taken for granted that the top of the horn was set with a semi-precious stone. The cinch of horsehair that held it in place was eight inches wide, and from the horse's belly fell a great horsehair tassel of varied colours. The skirt was tooled and silver-studded leather, and once when the broncho turned, the initials "S.J." were visible worked into the cantle in silver studs.

The reins were drowned in knots of coloured horsehair, and the bridle carried further the silver studding of the saddle. Over the broncho's chest hung an apron of gold braid in which were set coloured stones.

It was perhaps indicative of the cowboy's sense of fitness that in his own apparel he carried out the decorative idea. His white sombrero was of a size no cowboy could use for real punching. It must have cost at least a tophand's earnings for half a season. A band of coloured horsehair broke a gleam of white and succeeded in making the hat appear even

more enormous. A fringed leather riding shirt was partly concealed beneath a horsehair waistcoat, both obviously the work of skilled Indian hands. Wing chaps of bull's hide, the edges of the flaps laced with white leather thongs, spoke of southern origin where such chaps were necessitated by the prickly scrub through which a cowboy was forced to ride. The boots were of soft leather dotted with hearts and diamonds of white doeskin.

The outfit must have cost a small fortune, and the inspector wondered.

Larry went no further than frank admiration. "Wouldn't take much more of that," he declared, "to make me quit clerking and take to riding herd."

The inspector grunted. The picture of Larry riding herd was amusing. "If you could afford an outfit like that, my boy, you wouldn't need to ride herd."

"What do you mean?" Larry puzzled. "Mean he must be a millionaire, a dude puncher?"

Inspector Barker's convincing negative was a shaking head and a frown. "When you're here longer you'll get to know a puncher when you see one. I said 'if you could afford it'. He can't."

"I don't know what you mean."

"No puncher can afford that—if you know what I mean." He had no wish to go more deeply into it, and to the clerk's look of bewilderment he explained: "No cowboy can afford what he spends on his outfit." He jerked a thumb towards the cowboy. "I'm willing to wager he hasn't two dollar bills to rub together . . . and yet he'd starve before he'd sell what he has there." He turned back determinedly to the scene on the street.

Entertaining a crowd on the streets of Medicine Hat was not an unusual or a difficult task. Usually the street crowds were going nowhere in particular—certainly nowhere that could not wait—and they were ready to listen and watch. They were also ready to duck for a doorway when the shooting commenced, for the entertainment that usually occurred almost always ended that way. No one was ever killed, seldom was anyone seriously injured, but the exuberance of

a cowboy on his periodic visits to town demands something explosive, and that he has always at hand. Cowboys who had been isolated on the ranges for a couple of months had to have some outlet, drunk or sober, and up to the shooting stage the police seldom interfered. There might be much racing of bronchos, much shouting, much ogling of women, but the law was understanding and lenient. Fights were broken up, and the participants might spend a few hours in the local jail to cool off. Now and then the street lights were shot out, but when the culprits were caught no cowboy refused to recognize his liability.

Medicine Hat was inclined to be lenient with ebullient spirits.

But the show today was different. It was not only different; it was also puzzling. The cleverness of the little group of entertainers was so surprising as to demand an explanation, a cleverness that was largely wasted on such a crowd.

That was what remained fixed in the inspector's mind as he watched, and he asked himself why they were there, what they could hope to get from what they were doing, and why they had chosen such an isolated town as Medicine Hat. Somehow he knew there would not even be a collection.

It was real entertainment. It centred in the leader. He was a handsome, muscularly built young fellow, with an infectious laugh that in itself required no extraneous assistance; and by the movement of his lips and the hearty response of the crowd he must possess a gift of attractive chatter. Certainly the crowd was in convulsions much of the time. Now and then laughter was shot with outspoken exclamations of surprise and admiration.

What the inspector first saw was a swift succession of card tricks, and the way the young fellow handled the cards could only have come from years of practice. For what purpose? the inspector asked himself. The cowboy would take a full pack of cards and string it from hand to hand like a concertina, all the time talking and seemingly paying no attention to what he was doing. Someone must have suggested that the cards were strung together, for he assumed a hurt expression, gathered them in his hand, bent the pack, and snapped them

out one by one over the crowd. One could almost see tears in his eyes that he should be suspected of anything so tricky.

The crowd jeered at the doubter, and the cowboy's face broke into a wide grin.

Trick followed trick in rapid succession.

The inspector's eyes were fixed on those flexible, clever fingers. They were not the hands of an ordinary cowboy, but they were muscled like the rest of his body. Once the cards were gathered with apparent carelessness, ruffled as he talked, and then with a twist the pack was torn in two, the parts showered over the spectators. There was unusual strength in those fingers as well as flexibility.

No cowboy tricks, those. And yet—and yet the inspector knew that those same fingers could handle a rope, and the steer at the end of the rope. None but a cowboy sat a horse like that, none but a cowboy would spend so much on his equipment.

But why make a display of it in Medicine Hat? They were strangers, and the inspector set them down as strangers from across the Border. No one in Canada, for instance, wore chaps like those. No one in Canada would have spent so much time on such accomplishments.

There was more to come. The leader held out his hand to one of his friends and an accordion was placed in it.

When he commenced to play, Larry's eyes sparkled, and he opened the door to listen. Inspector Barker, too, listened. And his wonder grew, for here was skill equal to that displayed with the cards.

Musical instruments were not uncommon among cowboys. Out through the bunk-houses of the Canadian West were scores of fiddles and mouth-organs and jew's-harps, and not a few guitars and banjos and flutes. The accordion, too, was not unknown. But nowhere had the crowd ever before heard music like this, and their feet were set to tapping, their eyes to dancing.

The musician seemed to be drowned in his own music. His eyes were fixed far away towards the top of the cutbank, over the heads of the crowd, and his knees kept time against the saddle skirts. A gentle smile transformed his handsome face.

Inspector Barker winked rapidly. Surely this was no mere cowboy, the rough, hell-for-leather, hard-drinking, reckless young fellows who took to riding herd—and became more reckless and tough as they aged. Surely he had broken loose from the stage. Perhaps a nervous breakdown.

But the questions were answered in his own mind. There were the earmarks of a puncher—and certainly no nerves. And yet—and yet——

Suddenly the music ended, and the cowboy appeared to drop back to earth, for he looked down on the crowd and smiled apologetically. He dismounted, detached the rope from his saddle and commenced to twirl it, the crowd pushing back to clear a space. One after another his three friends leaped into the loop and out, moving so fast that it did not seem possible that the circling loop could miss them. They became a bewildering maze of dancing figures.

Rope twirling was an art every cowboy practised, and there was little to learn of it. Yet somehow this was different. The leader handed the rope over to one of his friends as it twirled, picked up the accordion, and commenced to play. And the other three danced to the music in and out of the loop.

The crowd was vocal and cheering. Here and there someone whistled. The local punchers in the crowd looked at one another with incredulous, shaking heads. This was something they had never so much as imagined.

Even Inspector Barker's hands came together in approval.

On a long note music and dancing ended, and the rope was coiled and hung over the saddle-horn.

The leader mounted. He looked out over the applauding crowd and smiled, a grateful smile that increased the applause. Into that smile he could put anything he wished. Those flashing eyes, that wide, expressive mouth, that chin, sensitive as a girl's yet strong—they held the crowd at his mercy. In his face was sensitiveness without weakness, a strange appeal without begging, a confident kindling of friendship. His shoulders were square and wide, his waist narrow, and the thighs that hugged the saddle bulged with muscle.

Almost unconsciously the inspector appraised him as a good man to have as a friend, dangerous as an enemy.

The cowboy raised his hand to still the applause, in preparation for some new form of entertainment.

At that moment around the corner from Toronto Street came a little pinto in the amble, half trot, half walk, of the broncho that has never learned to walk. In the saddle was a dusky-faced, black-haired man, plainly an Indian or a half-breed. He was seated sideways in the saddle, one leg thrown carelessly over the horn. His great body slouched forward, head bent, as if scarcely awake. But he must have noticed the crowd immediately, for his rein-hand tightened a little, and the pinto stopped, its ears bent stiffly forward, as if it, too, wondered at the scene before it.

Then the rein slackened and the pinto moved slowly forward.

Larry touched the inspector on the arm and whispered excitedly: "That's the breed, Blue Pete. I'll bet he could do that rope twirling as well as they did."

The cowboy had stopped in the middle of a sentence, his eyes fixed on the approaching half-breed. Absent-mindedly he accepted a watch from someone in the crowd; he had evidently asked for it as part of the next trick. He withdrew his gaze from the newcomer for a moment and examined the watch doubtfully. A remark the inspector was unable to hear brought a gust of laughter from the onlookers, then he raised the watch high above his head and turned once more to the oncoming half-breed. His smile widened with invitation.

The crowd, too, had become aware of the pinto and its rider, and a welcoming smile flickered over it. Several voices shouted to him.

"Hey, Pete! He wants you."

Larry pressed his head into the opening of the door and tried to listen. "What's he want the breed for?" he inquired of his companion.

Inspector Barker appeared not to hear. "Of course, of course!" he grunted. "He had to work into the thing at this moment!"

The clerk noticed the tone and turned. "What's the matter with that? Don't you like Blue Pete? Has he given the Mounties any more trouble lately? I thought he'd given up rustling."

"Of course he has." The inspector scowled. "He won't rustle—as long as there's anything else as interesting. Just now he and Mira have the best-run ranch in the district."

"Who's Mira?"

"His white wife. She knows ranching as well as he does, and that means a lot. Now shut up and listen." He pulled the clerk from the opening and inserted himself in it.

The cowboy extended the watch towards the half-breed, smiling and beckoning.

Larry's head shook warningly. "He better not try any of his tricks on Blue Pete, eh?"

The half-breed had noticed the extended hand and had stopped, but the crowd parted, and the pinto moved forward once more.

Inspector Barker pulled the door wide open and stepped out to the pavement. He was uneasy, though he did not know why. He agreed with Larry that no one would be wise to play tricks on the half-breed, and he involuntarily moved nearer to be on hand if anything happened.

The cowboy caught the name from the welcoming crowd. "Hello, Blue Pete! Welcome to our little group. 'Blue Pete,' eh? A darn good name, too, for a good man, I'll bet." He ran his eye over the half-breed's frame with frank admiration. "I know a tophand when I see one. All right, Pete, now be a tophand for me and help me out. All you have to do is to hold this watch. I wouldn't trust myself to hold such a fine piece of jewellery for long."

Blue Pete hung back.

The crowd appealed to him: "Aw, come on, Pete. Be a good sport. Take it."

Still the half-breed hesitated.

The cowboy turned on that attractive smile of his. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Pete," he said. "Take it and it's yours to keep."

Inspector Barker looked out over the crowd, feeling the atmosphere, sensing the groundwork for any amount of trouble, though he had no idea what form it would take. Across the crowd he picked out a number of the more important ranchers; they had probably left their lounging chairs on the

Alberta Hotel verandah to see what was attracting the crowd. There was the fat Cooney Featherstone of the Double Bar-Y, Jim Allen of the T-Inverted R, and Ford Welch of the Double X. In a way their presence added dignity and stability to the crowd that sought only entertainment—at any cost.

The little pinto appeared to come forward of its own accord, edging nearer to the steel-dust broncho and nosing at it in a friendly way. The half-breed grinned when he saw it, and he reached out to take the proffered watch.

“Just a moment, Pete.” The entertainer leaned forward and jerked a newspaper from the hands of someone standing near and proceeded to wrap the watch in it. The paper parcel he held out to the half-breed and laughed. “It’s guaranteed not to bite, Pete. Honest, it’s not a bit dangerous.”

Blue Pete grinned uncomfortably. The crowd jeered. The half-breed and danger were old friends.

The cowboy read the laugh aright. “All right, Pete, it’s sure death. Now will you take it?”

The huge brown hand closed on the parcel, and a cheer went up.

“Tut, tut, Pete!” The cowboy eased the half-breed’s fingers open. “Don’t hide it. I want the crowd to keep their eye on it all the time—just to be sure you’re not in on this. There mustn’t be even the appearance of any sleight-of-hand stuff in a simple trick like this.” He turned to the crowd. “To clear the air—I never before saw or heard of this man, so there can’t be collusion. You know him; I don’t. But I know the goods when I see it, and a he-man like this deserves recognition. Also this intelligent little pinto of his. That’s why I’m giving him this parcel—no matter what the owner of the watch may say.” He laughed. “When someone else puts up the gift I’m always liberal.”

He eyed the owner of the watch who showed some uneasiness. “You know you’ll never be able now to get this watch back, don’t you? Dear me! What a mess I’ve got myself into with my crazy generosity! But I can’t take it back now, can I? Not with anyone like Blue Pete to reckon with. Just the same, don’t start shooting till I see if I can squeeze out of this with a whole skin. Anyone got an idea

that'll help?" The corners of his mouth dropped appealingly. And the crowd was more than a little uncertain, though it tried to laugh.

Someone shouted: "Look out Blue Pete doesn't turn the tables on you. You gotta be mighty smart to put anything over on him. He's the slickest guy in these parts, with or without a gun."

A worried expression appeared on the cowboy's face, and Blue Pete's grin was fixed and uneasy.

The cowboy shrugged and heaved an audible sigh. "Oh, well, it's gone too far to draw back now, so let's get it over with quickly and face the worst. As I said, Pete, the parcel's yours, so you can put it in your pocket. I'll settle with the owner."

Blue Pete eyed the parcel uncertainly, then quickly tore it open. It was empty.

With a grin of relief he tossed the paper back. "Ef yuh're givin' 'way watches wot ain't yer own, stranger," he said, "yuh bes' do it outa town whar the ridin's good." He jerked a thumb towards the local policeman standing on the outskirts of the crowd. "Cops is apt to ast questions."

The laugh that greeted it was short and mirthless, for the crowd wondered about the watch. The owner was frankly worried.

The cowboy winked at him and handed him the paper the half-breed had returned. The man unfolded it, and the watch lay in his hand.

The cowboy turned to Blue Pete, whose crooked eyes were fixed admiringly on the steel-dust broncho. "Like it, do you? So do I. . . . If you want to see more of it I'd be glad to add you to our little show." He ran his eyes over the pinto. "And I think I'd like to know more about that little animal of yours. You're a big fellow to be riding anything so small, but I can see she doesn't think so. . . . A mare, eh?"

Someone called out: "Pete's a real puncher, an' Whiskers is a cut-out bronc. Besides," with a laugh, "he sometimes gives us a free show of his own here in town. Not the kind you're giving, but it's damn' exciting sometimes."

"You don't need to tell me that," said the cowboy. "My lads and I know a thing or two about cows, but we could find a place for a pukka puncher like Pete. Which reminds me—to remind you—that we're looking for jobs right now. This show was only to advertise ourselves. We're cowboys, first and last, and we understand the beef roundup is about to start here. Now who's going to let us show what we can do along that line? Don't all speak at once. We must all be with the same outfit."

Inspector Barker crept back unnoticed to the store and passed through the back door to the lane. As he retraced his steps across the railway tracks to the barracks he frowned. He was thinking—and his thoughts led nowhere in particular.

CHAPTER III

AT THE NEWSPAPER OFFICE

BACK IN his office he absent-mindedly folded the report he had prepared and without re-reading it sealed the envelope and dropped it in the outgoing mail basket. He was still deep in thought that had nothing to do with the report.

Once he roused himself to peer through the window. South Railway Street was deserted except for two cowboys against the wall of the Commercial Hotel, hanging affectionately to each other in order to remain erect. The inspector did not see them. What he saw was that crowd of interested spectators encircling a group of strange cowboys whose oddly expert antics amused and surprised them and him.

There was much about that scene that puzzled him. In the first place it was difficult to accept as mere cowboys young men so expert in arts foreign to what was presumed to be their daily work, what they advertised as their daily work. He was not unaccustomed to surprising attainments among cowboys, but his lifetime of experience in the cow country failed to pass casually off the street-show he had witnessed. Even during the busy season punchers had many free hours, and most of them had picked up something that had nothing to do with riding herd. They played a variety of instruments, they lived, one might say, with a lasso in their hands, but the climax of their attainments had been reached before the level so easily exhibited there that day on South Railway Street. And why exhibit it in a place like Medicine Hat? Over and over the questions repeated themselves in his mind.

Looking for a job? Well, he had to know more about that before he was prepared to accept it.

A shadow passed before the window, and he recognised Sergeant Mahon and was at the door of his office as his

subordinate entered the hall. He beckoned him in and closed the door after him.

"You didn't see that show just now on South Railway Street, Sergeant."

"No, sir, but I was told about it."

"Any comments—worth our attention?"

"Well, sir, it seemed to be a cut above what one would expect from itinerant cowboys."

"It was—several cuts. I saw it."

"My first thought, sir, was what are they doing here?"

"It was my first—and last."

"I understand, sir," said the sergeant, "that they're riding the chuck line—looking for a punching job."

"At least that is what they say. . . . I was over at Drinnan's store, and then I managed to get out to the street without being noticed. That head chap doesn't need to come all the way to the Hat to get a job—at almost anything. I'll bet he's a tophand at punching, and he could make a living on the stage . . . wads of money more than he'll make helping at the beef roundup. Even his rope-work is worlds above anything I've seen before."

The sergeant laughed. "I gathered that. A group of punchers up on Fourth Avenue were trying some stunts with the rope—and not getting far. The crowd was jeering at them."

The inspector regarded him gravely. "Mahon, no puncher in these parts would get so expert as they were short of years of practice. Those lads have spent most of their time at it. . . . Did anyone know where they came from?"

"From across the Border somewhere, sir. I don't think there's any doubt about that."

The inspector nodded thoughtfully. "At some time they've worked in the south. They wore wing chaps—bull's hide. We don't see them round here except now and then on a tenderfoot . . . and they're no tenderfeet." He sat for a few minutes jabbing at the blotter with a letter opener. "Better make a few inquiries—not too prying, you understand. I don't want to frighten them . . . and they'll be quick on the uptake. I want to find out more about them before they get away."

"But if they get a job here, sir?"

"Then we'll have time to find out. If they don't get jobs we'll know they're not anxious for them, because the beef roundup will need every one the ranchers can get."

"Do you suspect anything, sir?" inquired Mahon.

"I . . . suspect . . . everything . . . until I know better. Anyway, we like to know all we can about our visitors. I don't know what makes me more anxious than usual in this case. I can't imagine that they've come here only to make enough to eat. You know as well as I do that most of these visitors from across the Border come because it's become unhealthy for them over there." The inspector raised his eyes suddenly to the sergeant's face. "Did anyone tell you Blue Pete was there?"

Worry flashed into Mahon's face, for the half-breed was a personal friend—a constantly worrying one. "You mean he—he worked with them, sir?"

"Oh, it's not quite as bad as that. It was accidental . . . at least, it appeared so. He happened to ride up at the beginning of a trick, and the cowboy used him." The inspector smiled mirthlessly. "Blue Pete's an example of a puncher fleeing across the Border to us because it wasn't comfortable on the other side."

Mahon stiffened. "It was that, sir, or shooting a small army of them. There's been nothing unhealthy about him over here—at least not for a long time. We have good reason to know that—and appreciate it, sir, don't you think?"

Inspector Barker laughed teasingly. "All right, all right. . . . Just the same, I'd have fewer grey hairs if he hadn't come to us."

"I think, sir," returned the sergeant soberly, "you wouldn't have any hair at all if he hadn't done what he has done so well for us, if I may say so, sir. Ever since that second little flare-up with Mira he's done for us what we could probably never have done ourselves. Surely we have no reason to suspect him now."

"You think so." The inspector's head shook gloomily. "I hope you're right. But he's a special friend of yours . . . and my responsibility. But," straightening in his chair, "that

isn't where we started. I must know something more about these chaps. I'm wondering—I'm wondering——"

Suddenly he whirled about, the chair rocking dangerously. "I'll try to round up the story myself. Perhaps Steve Claver has found out something. That's his business. He has to fill those columns of his—even if he does nothing but guess at it. Sometimes it helps."

From their nails he again took cap and riding crop, and the sergeant started to leave.

"Oh, by the way, when does the roundup start?"

"They're getting ready for it now. Next Monday, I'm told."

"Who's captain?"

"Texas."

"Texas again, eh? The ranchers must like him. The 3-Bar-Y has to get along without him more than its share. But Mira and Blue Pete would never protest. I don't think they could find a better captain. Well, I'll send a couple of you out there to keep an eye on things, not forgetting our visitors—if they're there. You'll take over. I'll send Simmons along too. Jenkinson can take over at Turner's Crossing while Simmons is away."

He stalked along the hall to the front door. There he turned. Mahon had almost reached his office at the rear of the barracks. "Better take what rest you can until Monday. I fancy you'll have little chance during the roundup. If I know anything it's going to be a difficult one." He straightened his tunic, readjusted his cap, and passed through to the street.

Straight up Main Street he strolled—except that what was a stroll to him was haste to another. Out for a walk, that was all. At the corner of Fourth Avenue he stopped and looked carelessly about. Deciding where to continue his walk, anyone would judge. He chose Fourth Avenue and paced along it towards Toronto Street, lightly slapping the side of his riding-breeches as he went.

A few yards short of Toronto Street he stopped and looked about. Over his head hung a somewhat amateurishly painted sign, "THE TIMES." As if it brought something to his mind, he turned in at the door, climbed a few steps, and pushed open an opaque-glass door to the right.

Before a small desk on which rested a typewriter a young woman turned as he entered.

"Oh, hello, Inspector!"

"Top o' the day to you, Laura! Boss in?"

Laura's eyes twinkled. "You're talking to her."

"Has Steve sense enough to acknowledge it?"

She tilted her head and smiled at him. "Every time I meet you, Inspector, I wonder how you came to waste your life in such a third-rate job."

"Well," said the inspector, "someone has to look after the Clavers and their ilk. Perhaps I'll have my reward hereafter."

A door at the back of the office opened and a small man entered. He was coatless, his sleeves rolled up, and printer's ink stained his hands. He shook a chiding head at the inspector and sighed. "Every time I leave Laura alone I return to find some gallant paying court. Out here where women are so scarce a mere husband leads an anxious life. It's enough to ruin any newspaper—and tomorrow publication day."

"Huh!" grunted the inspector. "And every time some man more worthy of Laura lays himself out to make her life less desolate you butt in. Poor Laura!"

Steve Claver, proprietor and editor of *The Times*, grinned. "So long as you bring news worth printing you're welcome, Inspector, yes, even to flirt a little. Any new murders of late? I haven't a single one in tomorrow's edition. Any rustling? I must have it in a hurry to use it tomorrow. That awful *News* down the street gets too many scoops on me. Why is it so much happens between Tuesday and Thursday, so little between Thursday and Tuesday?"

"This is Monday," said the inspector. "I'm not sure if anything has happened or not."

Steve Claver regarded him keenly, then opened a door at the side. "Come in and unburden yourself, Inspector. This is no friendly call."

The tiny office they entered was a typical weekly newspaper room, untidy and littered. Papers were piled on a huge flat-top desk far too big for the room, as well as on the one

extra chair. Above the desk an array of pigeon-holes, bursting with clippings, was nailed to the wall. Against the rear wall stood an old safe and on either side were filing cabinets piled with back numbers of the paper.

Steve swept the papers from the extra chair and shoved it forward. "I do hope something has happened, Inspector. Get it off your mind, with all the gory details, because I'm needed in the composing room. Get started."

Inspector Barker swelled out his chest. "Remember you're talking to authority, my boy."

"There's no authority above a newspaper," laughed Claver.

The inspector's laugh was absent-minded. "I was wondering if you have any information about a little group of strange punchers who've been putting on a show down on South Railway Street."

Steve Claver listened with nodding head. "I thought you'd do a bit of wondering about that. I've done some myself. Jim happened to drop in on that show. He was enthusiastic about it . . . so much so that I was about to call you up to see if you knew anything."

"I don't—except that I was in the crowd part of the time. There were things there, things done, too, that have no place among mere punchers. An accordion worth a stage, some sleight of hand, and rope twirling that never was attained on a ranch. And you should have heard the patter that went with it. I'm curious."

Steve laughed. "Suspicious, you mean."

The inspector had not intended to be so frank. "I suppose I'm suspicious of everyone."

"And you come to me to find out what you can't find out for yourself. Well, that's to be expected of the Mounties. . . . But it so happens that I know nothing—except what Jim picked up. Those lads come from across the Border, of course."

"From some distance across the Border," grunted the inspector. "They're not from Montana. Montana never raised a crew like that."

"And you want to know their home address, their telephone number, the size of the shirts they wear, their favourite breakfast foods, whether they prefer blondes or brun——"

The inspector rose. "All I want to know is what they're doing here. And don't mention even that outside this office. But if you hear anything, let me know." He nodded towards the outer office. "If they're hanging around town they'll hear of that wife of yours, and they'll be dropping in, as all the punchers do when they come to town. I'll count on Laura."

CHAPTER IV

AT THE CHIEF'S OFFICE

THE INSPECTOR had not yet completed his inquiries. Emerging onto Fourth Avenue, he turned back towards Main Street and at the corner turned again to the left. The Men's Club stood on the other corner, but as he turned in he remembered that at that hour the club would be empty, and he crossed Main Street and passed along beside the City Hall to a side door. Entering, he followed a short, narrow hall to a door that bore a sign, "Police Department." Opening it, he entered another hall and at the end knocked on a door whose opaque glass announced "Chief of Police."

A voice shouted to him to come in.

Behind a desk at the far end of a large room sat a tall, well-proportioned man in uniform. His clean-shaven face was strong and square, and blue eyes looked coldly out from it.

"Hello, Inspector!" The words were welcoming enough, if the tone lacked something along that line.

"Hello, chief! Busy?"

A faintly derisive smile appeared at the corners of the chief's lips. "I'm always busy. We city police have work to do—all the time."

"That's too bad," sympathized the inspector. "I know how disagreeable you must find it—during your working hours."

The chief scowled. "If you redcoats would only catch the crooks before they reach us—but that isn't what you came in for. Sit down."

Inspector Barker laughed easily. "I really feel for you, chief. It isn't that we fail to catch them. The fact is they're so frightened of us that they leave their crimes to the city, where we try to leave such things to you."

It was the old friction between the two forces, the old resentment of the city police against the interference of the Mounted Police, who by law had jurisdiction everywhere.

"At any rate," declared the chief, "we haven't time to run about paying calls."

The inspector chuckled. Chief Dolan's bark was worse than his bite. "It's your salvation that your men are kept busy, chief. If they weren't they're the kind to get into trouble, then we'd just *have* to butt in."

"You do too damn much butting in now," growled Dolan.

"Then you don't need any help on that burglary?"

The chief reddened. The burglary had not been cleared up, though it looked like a local job. Medicine Hat was too distant from anywhere to tempt outsiders; and every stranger was spotted the moment he appeared.

"Of course," sneered the chief, "we haven't lain down on the reputation of always getting our men, like the Mounties have."

Riposte. Nothing so angered the inspector as the story-book phrase, commendatory as it was. To the Mounted Police it had become a taunt, not because it had not a strong element of truth in it, but because it was used so frequently by writers who have never so much as met a Mounted Policeman.

He managed to control himself. "At least a lot of writers make money out of it, chief, if we don't. But you can't say it's bad to earn such a reputation. Don't be envious. You may yet get those burglars—if you aren't too busy. Failing that, call on us. But that's apart from the purpose of my visit. A couple of hours ago I was witness of a curious scene from my window in the barracks. South Railway Street was completely blocked to traffic. Your man, Rankin, was there, but he appeared to be too interested to intervene." As Dolan started to interrupt, he continued: "Really I don't blame him. I was interested myself. The show was worth watching."

"You mean those strange cowboys." The chief scoffed frankly. "From the barracks window you must have seen a lot—at such a distance."

"But I saw enough to draw me closer. I stood on the street then and watched. It isn't often we have a show like that in the Hat."

"I wish I had time to dawdle about the streets," snapped the chief. "I recall that Rankin said you were there. It's easy to amuse some people."

"Yes, I noticed how it amused Rankin. Too bad you weren't there, chief. You missed something."

"I have other things to do."

"Other things than break up a street blockade?" queried the inspector.

"We'll handle anything that needs handling in town, Inspector," said the chief. "That isn't what you came for. You want to know something about those cowboys."

"Now that," applauded the inspector, "reveals the ferreting mind you have. I do."

"And you expect me to tell you what I know."

"I hope you will."

For a moment or two the chief was silent. Then: "I will, and it's all you or anyone else need know. They were looking for a job, and already they've found one—with Jim Allen at the T-Inverted R. I have no further interest in them; they'll be in your territory. You see," with a taunting smile, "I do find things out. They put on that show to advertise themselves, and you see how well it worked. There was quite a run for their services, but Jim got to them first. Too bad you couldn't find these things out for yourself. It must hurt to have to come to the city police, but you can always depend on us to help to cover your weaknesses. I take it you feared they were embryo rustlers."

"Until your brilliant work proved otherwise I'm afraid I might have feared something like that."

"Even on the dodge, eh? Well, you can do your own prying now. By the way, I hear Blue Pete was in the show."

Outwardly the inspector showed no concern. "He was pulled in by the cowboy," he said. He hoped the chief was as ignorant as was the public of the covert relationship between the Mounted Police and the half-breed.

"It may have looked that way," hinted the chief.

"Of course," agreed the inspector.

"But you don't suspect any connection?"

"It occurred on the streets of the Hat, chief. That would make it your business."

"But it's your business if the half-breed is up to his old tricks. If those cowboys are really rustlers——"

"If they are—it brings them within my business. . . . If they're rustlers, I must admit they could find no one so able to help as Blue Pete. But I don't believe he'd risk the 3-Bar-Y and everything there to return so openly to his old game. Besides, you must remember that he's done many a good turn for the ranchers."

Dolan grunted. "Humph! It was for himself, too, or he mightn't have done them. The breed will help anyone when it helps himself. When it doesn't—watch out."

"Thanks for the prod. Too bad we can't have you outside the town—your special talents. We need men who—suspect the worst. But we have more need of men to justify their suspicions. I must call on you oftener. You're a stimulant. I've always appreciated you."

Dolan's lip curled. "The feeling is mutual, Inspector. Any time you need to know anything that's within the borders of the town, come to me, Inspector, come to me. I like helping people who can't help themselves. And those cowboys—you'll meet them on the beef roundup in a week. Going? Good. We've both enjoyed the break, I'm sure."

They smiled at each other. The chief rose, Inspector Barker touched his cap formally. They parted.

The chief thought: I guess he got more than he bargained for. Inspector Barker had, and he went jubilantly down Main Street. For he knew now as he had never known before that no one suspected the rôle Blue Pete played in the work of the Mounted Police.

CHAPTER V

THE CHALLENGE

THE BEEF roundup, when the cattle were chosen in the fall for the distant markets, was the season's balance-sheet for the ranchers. The spring roundup was an arduous task for branding and dipping, that brought financial returns to no one. Winter scattered the herds it had not killed, and the cows were belligerently concerned for their calves. But they were thin and comparatively weak after the trying season and were in some ways less difficult to handle.

The beef roundup was different. In many ways it was simpler, in others more dangerous and trying. Throughout the summer months the herds were kept fairly well under control, so that there was less riding as a rule, and the cattle, accustomed to control, were usually more easily worked—if everything went well. When it didn't, when a steer weighing well over half a ton from the summer fattening went on the rampage, there was real trouble. Always there were a few scalawags, as the recalcitrant steers were called, and they made life miserable for the cowboys; but on the average the work was less arduous than in the spring. That was why discipline was apt to be more lax.

Texas, foreman of the 3-Bar-Y belonging to Mira and Blue Pete, was a good captain. It explained the frequency of his selection. A large part of his qualifications was the stern discipline he maintained over the riders. It did not make him popular, but it won respect.

There was a special reason for choosing Texas this year, since every rancher knew it would be a difficult time. The summer had been abnormally dry, so that the small streams about the Cypress Hills had largely disappeared, and a new camp site had to be selected. It had left no choice but the shores of Elk Lake, a large body of water nestling at the foot of the slope at the west end of the Cypress Hills.

It was not a popular site. It was the custom to avoid the Hills. That strange area of wooded hills and dales, extending from Saskatchewan into Alberta, was a favourite haunt of rustlers from across in Montana, and of wolves that preyed on the herds. Cowboys and cattle had learned to avoid the neighbourhood. But for weeks now the cattle had been forced nearer, within reach of the water in Elk Lake, and they had become bolder, some of them even taking shelter within the Hills.

The punchers disliked the prospect. They disliked the Hills, disliked running cattle near them. They dreaded the rustlers who popped out from the safe cover of the forest to round up the fatter steers, with no compunctions against shooting their way out. They dreaded the great timber wolf whose howl sent the blood racing through their veins in the dark of night, even when miles distant. Even the comforting shelter of the forest shade as a relief from the withering sun of the open prairie held no attraction for them.

And so there was some protest when Elk Lake was selected as the camp site. But no one could suggest anywhere better, and so the plan stood. It had even come into Texas's mind that with water so near the cattle might be handled more easily, hastening the operation. It was only a vagrant thought, however, and he was too experienced a puncher to give it much attention.

His own chuck-wagon, that of the 3-Bar-Y, was first on the scene. The 3-Bar-Y treated its riders well. For one thing it possessed one of the best-equipped chuck-wagons in the district, its one rival that of the Double Bar-Y, Cooney Featherstone's ranch. But then Cooney had a reputation to sustain. Both carried sheet-iron stoves, the type later made famous in the Calgary stampede, instead of relying on holes in the ground. Wing, the Chinese cook, was able to serve a good meal within a few minutes.

At the opposite end of the scale were the chuck-wagons of the T-Inverted R and the Double X, the former belonging to Jim Allen. It was said of Ford Welch of the Double X that he had had a discarded rawhide lasso boiled for soup. Jim Allen was little better, and it was with Allen's outfit that the strange cowboys had hired for the roundup.

A couple of hours after Texas had located his chuck-wagon Blue Pete appeared. Texas was surprised. The half-breed had never taken an active part in the roundups, though he always hovered about, anticipating rustlers and interfering at oddly opportune moments to prevent illegal branding. No one knew when he might appear on the scene, where he slept, or what he had in mind. And the uncertainty kept matters straight more effectively than the Mounted Police who were always in attendance at a roundup. It always happened that where temptation and opportunity were greatest he was certain to be. It might be added that his reputation as a shot, in quick drawing and straight shooting, stifled open protest. Whiskers' speed, too, counted more than a little.

Nevertheless it was seldom that the half-breed turned up at the chuck-wagon for a meal.

Now he rode in and dismounted. He said nothing, but by the time Wing had the meal ready the half-breed appeared to have settled down to stay. The Chinese was not happy about it; it made him nervous, and his steps were shorter and quicker as he moved about the stove, now and then glancing at his employer.

Blue Pete appeared to notice nothing. Apart from the cow-boys he lay on his back on the dead grass, his hands locked beneath his head.

Texas, too, wondered, though he was undisturbed. He had his work to do, and not even his employer could interfere with it or would venture to try. The captain of a roundup was boss.

An hour later another outfit passed along the lakeshore, seeking a location. Texas watched them go, and for some unexplained reason his head shook uneasily.

Blue Pete may have noticed it. "T-Inverted R," he muttered, and he raised himself on his elbow to watch.

"Jim's got some new hands," Texas said.

"Shure. Them's the new punchers from the south."

"I wouldn't mind owning a bronc like that one fellow's ridin'. What kind of a nag is it?"

"Steel-dust. I seen some o' them 'way over in Montana long time ago."

"Show-hosses?"

"Shure—an' a lot more. Durn good cow-broncs, them I seen, an' easy to train. Fast, too."

He glanced at Whiskers. The pinto had stopped feeding and stood watching the passing outfit. Her neck was arched, and her nostrils were dilated, as if in challenge. Blue Pete chuckled. "The' ole gal's jealous. Er mebbe she's jes' sayin' thar goes a durn good cayuse. She knows. . . . Durn good cowhand on that bronc, too."

Texas said: "That's the bunch that put on a show in the Hat. I heard about 'em. Jim Allen got 'em all for the roundup, didn't he?"

Blue Pete nodded. "Looks like. Four of 'em. Tha're all thar."

"I hope they fit in," said Texas doubtfully.

"Yuh won't need to give no orders thar, Texas. They know the game, them chaps." He frowned. "They know lots o' games, more'n I ever seen a puncher know before." His face cleared and he laughed. "Mighty near got a good watch outa the chap on the nice bronc. He gave it to me to hold . . . on'y it wasn't thar. Dunno how he done it. Slick fellow, that."

Texas shrugged. "He carries a big load—an' the bronc's all dolled up."

"Yuh shuda seen it t'other day. 'Tain't half dolled up now. Plays a 'cordion like sixty, too."

"He looked over here as if he intended to stop," Texas puzzled.

"Wish he wud. He seen me. Offered me a job that day with the watch. Jes' gittin' all het up over a watch I didn' git ain't no place for me. I'd be losin' me head an' shootin' nex' time." Suddenly he scrambled to his feet. "He's comin', Tex."

The steel-dust broncho had broken away from the group and was loping towards them. Blue Pete waited, embarrassed but not unwelcoming. Whiskers whinnied and was answered by the approaching broncho.

Blue Pete grinned.

So did the strange cowboy. "Smarty recognized an old friend—just as I do," he said, holding out his hand to the half-breed. "My old friend of the watch he didn't get. My

name's Jordan, Slick Jordan. I recognized the pinto. Howd'y, Pete?"

Pete's big hand swallowed the proffered one. "Howd'y."

Slick turned to Texas. "I understand you're boss. Your foreman, isn't he, Pete?"

"Shure—off the roundup."

The hands of the cowboy and roundup captain met for a moment.

"So we're to take orders from you. Well, that won't be a hardship. I know a puncher when I see one." He swept off the huge stetson. "Slick Jordan and Smarty at your service, captain." He chuckled. "'Slick and Smarty.' Not a combination to make us popular, is it? Just the same I think you'll find we're almost as good as our names. Ever since I was a kid they've called me Slick—I suppose because I was pretty smooth with my hands. Smarty I christened myself—just to make people wonder. Most people don't like it. Hope you don't mind."

"Call your bronc and yourself any damn' thing you like," said Texas. Somehow he did not feel at ease. "But there's a lot of slickness and smartness a puncher had better forget in a roundup."

"We do forget them—in a roundup. I hope you'll find that out. We'll do our work; don't worry about that."

"Come from the south?" asked Texas, pointing to the wing chaps.

Slick was slow in replying. "We come from everywhere, the south included. It's the only direction to come from, isn't it? My friends and I—there are three more—are seeing the world as we go along."

"Plan to stick around?"

"Well, we don't propose to take the bread from anyone's mouth, if that's what you're interested in. Reckon we won't stick around long after the roundup, though we haven't yet decided to a day or two. Of course," with the smile that was so attractive, "if the folks around here are nice to us—which to date they aren't—one never knows what might happen."

Texas turned away. "We're as nice to strangers as they

deserve," he said. "You'll find that out." He went to the chuck-wagon.

Slick watched him go, an odd smile about his lips. "He's prepared to dislike me, Pete," he said. "I played up too much to my name. Or perhaps he's envious of Smarty. Everyone tries to buy him. They should know it's hopeless. Why, without Smarty I wouldn't be here . . . wouldn't be anywhere I'd like to speak of—not this side of Hades. I reckon Texas didn't like our names. I don't blame him. Smarty, at least, deserves his name. I haven't found that mine makes friends for me . . . and I'm just fool enough to exploit it. I sort of throw it in their teeth. That's why they hate us so at the T-Inverted R. And, oh, how they do hate us! The worst of it is that annoyance always amuses me. I'm a cuss that way. But we were talking about Smarty. He and that pinto of yours have surely struck up a thick acquaintance. If the pinto's owner thinks the same about Smarty's owner, I don't care about the rest."

He laughed down on the half-breed who was obviously bewildered. "And yet you don't understand me much better than the rest, do you? I think you will—that's a feeling I have. At any rate Smarty is worth your respect. He's the dandiest nag in the country."

The half-breed found no difficulty in following him there, and he looked towards the pinto. "Dandiest, yuh mean, nexta Whiskers thar. Nothin' like her, steel-dust er nothin'."

Slick laughed. "Oh, I can spot a good nag, and the pinto's one. But mares can't keep up the pace on the ranges. That's my experience, and most cowboys will support me."

"Ast any cowboy around here," said Blue Pete shortly. "Yuh jes' dunno Whiskers."

"I'd like to. Willing to sell her?"

The half-breed stared incredulously at him, and his face darkened indignantly. "Thar ain't nothin' in all the world 'ud pay fer her—not all the steel-dusts ever born."

"All right, all right." Slick laughed agreeably. "Stick to your delusions, if they make you comfortable. Only I hope Smarty doesn't find it necessary to disillusion you. I'd hate to break a dream like that."

"Yuh cudn't. Yuh jes' cudn't," declared the half-breed.

"That's all right. We're both satisfied. But perhaps some time we'll find out. Now I must mosey along. We'll be seeing each other during the roundup, I suppose. Give my love to Texas and tell him to give us the dirty work. We'll show him."

He swung the broncho about on its hind legs, reached out to pat Whiskers' arching neck, and dashed away. He looked back once and waved—and laughed.

Blue Pete did not understand that laugh, and in a way it angered him. "Dang it," he growled, "wot's he grinnin' at? . . . An' dang him ef I don't sorta like him." It appeared to give him little satisfaction.

CHAPTER VI

THE STRANGE COWBOYS

THE BEEF roundup of that fall was to be remembered for a long time. In some ways there appeared little reason for it. It opened with no unusual problems to solve. Drought had been faced before without much trouble, and the very drought itself had brought the cattle close to the lake to feed, so that there should be less riding. Texas, too, was the most reliable captain they could have chosen.

Nevertheless it opened under a strain; in every outfit an inexplicable tension existed, and the fact that it was seemingly unauthorized made it more noticeable. Most of the punchers ascribed it to the effect of the long drought and of an unrelenting sunshine that got on one's nerves. At least they tried to explain it thus.

Looking back on it some might ascribe it to the great prairie fire that raced across the prairie while the drive to Dunmore Junction was on, though no connection was evident. Others, and there were not a few, let their memories return to the strange cowboys who had been hired by Jim Allen for the roundup. They could not explain why. A few let it pass as the usual effect of working so close to the sinister Cypress Hills.

Even away in Medicine Hat Inspector Barker was aware of the tension. It was his business to sense local feeling, and he seldom failed in his duty. It accounted for the assignment of two of his best men to keep in touch with the roundup. Had he had more men available he would have added a third.

He had lived long enough in the West to realize the effect of the long dry season on the tempers of weary cowboys as well as on the cattle. Goaded by thirst and forced to travel long distances for water, the cattle would be more than ordinarily

rebellious against control. And the cowboys, short-tempered already, would react against everything and everyone, including others of their kind. Irritable cowboys were always dangerous, and it did not simplify things that they were under orders from one of their own class raised temporarily to authority.

The sum of it all was that anything might happen, and the inspector had to foresee and prevent it.

The drought was bad enough, but added to it was a time of high winds, with inexplicable whirlwinds snatching choking dust from every old buffalo wallow and from the trails. Even the dead grass, when ground to powder by the passing of cattle and horses, rose in clouds to choke and blind. Everyone declared that never before had there been so much dust around the Cypress Hills, and even the town itself did not escape, especially when the wind swung about to the untenanted north and drove down the loose sand that made great areas of that district unsuitable for grazing.

Added to all that was the recent double murder¹ in the district which, though it had been solved, had left raw nerves and ugly suspicions, particularly among the night-herders.

In the two men he had chosen, Sergeant Mahon and Corporal Simmons, the inspector had complete confidence. They had been with the Force for several years and had never let him down. They had acted on many a roundup and had been tested under almost every condition. In addition they were both popular with the outfits. With Jenkinson taking over at Turner's Crossing in place of Simmons everything was arranged as well as it could be for any emergency. Langley would be stationed at the hut at Eagle Butte, not far from the Hills, available if necessary. Langley, the newest recruit, was delighted, but he could not restrain himself from remarking on the unusual precautions.

Mahon, feeling like his superior, merely smiled. "You'll be disappointed if we don't call for you, won't you?" he asked.

"I don't see how you can get along without me," replied Langley. "Anyway, I'm glad they didn't stick me out at the Crossing. Nothing ever happens there."

¹ See *Blue Pete Works Alone*.

"Nothing—except keeping an eye on the whole district," said Mahon shortly.

If the sergeant had felt the tension before, he was more conscious of it that day as he rode past the camps that had located themselves along the shores of Elk Lake. The roundup had not yet got under way, but that did not account for the care with which every camp had isolated itself from its neighbours. It did not promise well for the future. It meant that every outfit felt the tension as he did. As a rule the preparation period for a roundup was marked by a great deal of horse-play and teasing, but today not one outfit appeared to be aware of the others. And the silence increased his foreboding.

The only break in the silence came from the camp of the T-Inverted R. While still several hundred yards away he could hear music, and he tried to convince himself that it was a good sign. He was less confident when he realized that it was an accordion, played with a skill he had never before heard. He knew it must be the new cowboy, Slick Jordan. Nearer, he could hear voices in low song. There would be a solo, with other voices joining in the refrain.

The song they sang was the one most familiar among cowboys, the "Old Chisholm Trail," a song with so many verses that the original had long since been lost sight of. Every cowboy had versions of his own, most of them ribald, but wherever it started it was almost a rite for every puncher within hearing to add what voice he had.

Mahon listened, his uneasiness growing, and for a time he did not know why.

"I woke one morning on the old Chisholm Trail,
Rope in hand and cow by the tail.
Coma ti yu youpy, youpa ya, youpa ya,
Coma ti yu youpa, youpa ya."

Then he understood: only a few voices had joined in. Yet a dozen punchers were within hearing.

Almost involuntarily he turned in towards the camp. He noticed that the outfit had split into two distinct groups, one of which ranged about the musician. They were the strange

cowboys. At some distance sat the regular members of the T-Inverted R outfit, their backs turned coldly and silently to the music.

The latter group greeted him limply and with obvious uneasiness. He replied briefly and passed on to the singers. The musician grinned up at him and winked, but continued to play and sing to the end of the verse.

He beckoned then. "Come right along, Sergeant, and join in the chorus. There's no charge to the very best seats. In fact they're all empty as yet." He nodded towards the other group. "Bleachers pay the same. I've taken on the job of official entertainer for the T-Inverted R—without pay. I'm really only a hanger-on. My mates here will do the work to my music."

"Too lazy or too rich?" laughed the sergeant, though he did not feel like laughing.

"Neither. Three of us can do as much work as four ordinary punchers. I prefer to amuse myself in other ways . . . even if it fails to amuse others."

Mahon was puzzled. "You mean you aren't working for Jim Allen?"

"Your first guess is perfectly correct, Sergeant. I'm getting my board for tinkling this instrument. Of course, now and then when I'm needed I'll pitch in. Where there are cows I can't keep my hands from a rope." He nodded towards his broncho that stood as if listening to what was said. "Smarty couldn't stand idly by when there's work to do."

He leaned forward and in a tone of exaggerated concern whispered: "I'm afraid my selections have been a little too classical for their plebeian tastes. But even the 'Old Chisholme Trail' fails to touch their flinty hearts. It's heart-breaking for one as sensitive as I am. They must have lost their voices in the names they call us to one another. But then this is Canada: you may raise a different brood here."

"Perhaps we do." The sergeant regarded him fixedly, uncertain how to react to the banter.

Slick winced. "I think . . . I understand."

Mahon glanced from one group to the other. "We're difficult out here to get acquainted with. Newcomers have to

prove themselves. When they know you better, if you deserve it, they'll sing with you. You're merely passing through the experience of every tenderfoot who visits the West. We're slow to accept strangers."

"Does that include the Mounted Police?" inquired Slick.

"More so than the others. But it's merely an official position we're forced to take with strangers. If you show you know your job, if you behave yourselves——" He stopped, for Slick's eyes had taken on a new keenness. "I mean if you know your job and do it, that's all that will be asked of you until——"

The cowboy's face had cleared, and he interrupted. "If that's all. Say, we were born among cows, and I hope we die among them . . . perhaps through them. If we can't show the Canadian West that we can ride and rope and cut with the best of them—well, there won't be anything for us to do but slink across the Border with our tails between our legs. The roundup'll soon show what we can do."

The sergeant had grown thoughtful. "I should think you could make more at punching in the States."

"Perhaps. But for us money isn't everything. We like change, excitement, new conditions, meeting new friends." He chuckled. "Yes, even meeting new enemies. Over there they seem to appreciate my music more, but the fact is, Sergeant, that we heard so much about Canada—and the Mounted Police—that we came across to see if it's true."

"And is it?" asked the sergeant suddenly.

"The country? We haven't had time to find out. The Mounties? . . . Already I've formed opinions about them."

"Well," advised the sergeant, "don't jump to conclusions."

He turned away to the other group; it was ranged in a half-circle, the backs of the cowboys to Slick Jordan and his friends. They could not help hearing the sergeant approaching but they paid no attention, and a wave of anger flooded over him. To the front of the semi-circle he rode and turned to face them. For a few moments he frowned down on them.

"Well, Tully!"

Tully Mason, foreman of the T-Inverted R, was a bull-necked, red-faced man of mature years. His upper lip was

covered with a bristly moustache that was scarcely noticeable against the dark colour of his skin. Now and then some venturesome puncher called him—not to his face—Porky. The nickname arose from the moustache that stuck out stiffly like quills as his lip protruded in anger. Popular in a way among his own men, he was not generally liked elsewhere, but that did not make him less efficient at his job.

To the sergeant's greeting he did not so much as raise his face. He seemed to be engrossed in the ornamental embroidery on the side of one riding-boot. He grunted and that was all.

Mahon drew a long breath to steady himself. "You're going to have lots of help this time, Tully," he said.

Mason shrugged. "Such as it is," he growled. "'Tain't numbers counts in a roundup."

"But they look like real punchers."

"We don't need 'em," Tully snarled. "We ain't got no use for their kind."

For a moment Mahon debated with himself whether to stop there. But his job was to forestall trouble, and right here before him was the seed of trouble. "Have you any real grievance against them?"

"They ain't—what we like."

"I suppose Jim should have consulted you." Mahon was growing angrier.

Mason looked up with curling lip but said nothing; and Mahon, ashamed of himself, added: "If they do the work, that's all you can ask of them, I suppose." He looked across to where the music had resumed. "At least you'll have entertainment."

"We managed to get along without it all these years," grunted the foreman. "We could keep on."

"You appear," said the sergeant warningly, "to have made up your mind not to get along with them."

"We don't have to like 'em, do we?" The group laughed nastily.

"No . . . but there are things you do have to do. Just why don't you like them?"

"They're too damn' smart." Tully looked around for support, and his friends gave it.

Mahon laughed. "Perhaps they'll be as smart with the cows." When there was no reply he leaned from the saddle, his face grim. "There's going to be no trouble, Tully. If they start any, I'll handle it. There's nothing for you to do about it. Understand? Because I don't believe they'll be the ones to start it."

He straightened and let his eyes move across the sullen faces. "You've heard what I said." He wheeled Jupiter about and rode away.

CHAPTER VII

ATTEMPTED MURDER

THERE are, however, so many paths trouble can follow, and it was not long in finding one. The very feeling was in the air. Blue Pete was aware of it. He had noticed the division in the T-Inverted R outfit, and it did not promise well that Texas appeared to have taken a dislike to Slick Jordan. Texas was the West personified. He wasn't prepared to accept such self-assurance from newcomers, and he felt no reluctance about showing it.

The situation worried the half-breed. There were several reasons why it affected him particularly. In the first place Texas was his own foreman, in whom he had every confidence, and trouble in the roundup would be blamed on him. Then, too, he was surprised to realize how much he himself liked Slick.

It all built up to keeping a close eye on events.

That was why next day he found himself near the section that had been assigned to the T-Inverted R. Texas had placed them next the Cypress Hills, beyond the southern end of the lake. It promised to be the busiest and most difficult section. Tully would have little time to make trouble. Not only were the cattle more numerous there, but they appeared to have foreseen the roundup and had chosen a grazing ground from which they could readily take refuge in the forest that covered the heights.

Another thought had come into Texas's mind: the feeling Tully and his friends had developed against the newcomers was almost certain to spread, and with other riders on only one side it would spread more slowly and have less opportunity to show. It was precautions like that that made Texas so valuable as a roundup captain.

Few ranchers ever turned up for the roundups, for which there were several reasons. Not only had they no authority on

roundup, thus losing rank and dignity, but also the cowboys resented their presence and were not slow to show it. In addition, a few of them were not punchers.

Blue Pete, however, occupied a somewhat different position. He attended every roundup but took no official part, so that his presence aroused little comment. He wandered about at will, with no defined duties, no defined destination, indeed, no defined purpose. Even his own chuck-wagon appeared to interest him little. The district had never been able to rid itself of the memory of the original ownership of the ranch, from which it had descended to Mira, the half-breed's white wife, sister of the previous owners.

It was admitted, too, that Blue Pete had often done much to smooth the path of the roundups. Somehow he appeared so often to be at hand in time to prevent illegal or careless work, such as false-branding and small-time rustling.

The Cypress Hills had come to be associated with him. Everyone knew that he spent much of his time there, and only he was familiar with them. That long strip of upset world, of forest and ravine, popping up from the level prairie, was little known because its weird formation, and incidents connected with it, frightened the ordinary puncher. In his mind, associated with rustling and with wolves, there appeared no other reason for its existence. Few cowboys penetrated beyond the edge of the forest, though they knew that inside were hundreds of tight little hiding-places for rustled herds. It was there the half-breed retired for lengthy stays. It added to the mystery he was.

Today as he rode along he could not keep his eyes for long from the overhanging forest that crowned the height to his left. He had passed the end of the lake, and the slope climbed almost a mile to the trees. It was a blazing hot day, and he and Whiskers longed for the shade of those trees, the silence and the privacy. But there was too much on his mind, and eyes and ears were keen for it.

He looked about for the T-Inverted R punchers but could not find them for a time. Then, off before him he heard the pounding of running animals and the shouting of cowboys. The ground was rougher there, with many deep coulees, and from one of these came the sounds.

The noise struck something sensitive in him, and he frowned and drew in. He could conceive of no situation that called for it, but perhaps the cows had been more difficult than usual and the punchers had lost patience—and their heads. Particularly in a beef roundup the driving is done at a leisurely pace so that the cattle will not lose weight. The clamour before him showed that this precaution had been forgotten.

Abruptly two cowboys rode into view. They had emerged from another coulee and were waiting, plainly puzzled and anxious. A few minutes later, off to the half-breed's left, another rider came in sight, and he recognized Slick Jordan.

At that instant cattle came racing into view far beyond, making straight for the lake.

There were four of them, and they charged forward at terrific speed, pursued by a shouting cowboy, while farther back came two of his companions, shouting with all the force of their lungs. A sure-fire cause for a stampede.

A glance told what was happening: the four steers were scalawags that had probably given much trouble, and the cowboys were driving them mercilessly, recklessly. But why?

A scalawag, particularly in the fall when he has reached his full weight, is dangerous, and a cowboy must keep a wary eye on him. More than a half-ton of furious steer, charging blindly at anything blocking its way, is something to avoid. Many a broncho and not a few cowboys have been killed by them.

The steers, Blue Pete saw, were in a mood for anything desperate, and the cowboys were goading them to blind fury. They were mad with fright and completely reckless. Anything that got in their way would suffer.

Nevertheless they had to be stopped.

Something clicked in the half-breed's brain as he recognized the two waiting cowboys whose duty it would be to stop that rush. They were Slick's friends.

He jerked the reins, and Whiskers dashed forward.

Slick, too, had sensed what was happening, and Smarty was moving at full speed towards his friends now blocking the path of the mad steers. He shouted something the half-breed could not hear, but in answer one of the pair before the steers

wheeled about and rode to one side. The other was having trouble with his mount.

The steers came on. Two of them appeared to see the lone rider, for they shifted directly towards him, seeing something on which to crash their fury. Still the broncho in their path, panic-stricken now, refused to move.

The cowboys behind increased their clamour, and in the sound Blue Pete sensed a note of triumph. A blaze of anger surged through him. But there was nothing he could do at such a distance. Tails stiff, their horns sweeping the ground, the two steers surged forward, their great bulks pounding the ground. They bellowed now that they saw a victim, and the sound increased the terror of the trembling broncho that refused to move out of the way.

Blue Pete and Slick had ridden in together, keeping to a height from which they could see what was happening. Slick rode bent forward, his head thrown back stiffly, his eyes fixed on the terrifying scene.

Suddenly he snarled, "I—see!" and his teeth came together with an audible click as his heels slammed into Smarty's sides.

Side by side the two men dashed through the intervening coulee. When they rode up the other side the cowboy was still there, tugging at the broncho, directly before the charging steers.

Slick shouted: "Let them go, Dave. For God's sake get out of the way."

Dave heard him and waved but remained in the saddle. The broncho stood paralysed with fear, its legs braced, head lowered before the oncoming doom. Then suddenly it commenced to buck.

Slick grated an oath. "That's the kind of mounts they give us. They don't want us to do good work. There'll be hell to pay for this. Jump, Dave, jump!" he yelled.

Dave waved again, continued the struggle for a terrifying moment more, then flung himself from the saddle. He had left it almost too late. The leading steer almost brushed him as it crashed into the broncho. It caught the terrified beast in the side and sent it high in the air, to fall, a disembowelled

corpse, a moment later. The shock of it scarcely made the steer so much as pause.

Blue Pete had drawn in. Slick went on. He had released his rope and with a few lightning movements had it ready for use.

Around the second steer he swung, racing towards the leading cowboy who had been driving the steers to madness. The rope spun out. It fell over the head of the cowboy's broncho.

Smarty, true cowpony, turned sideways for the throw, then swung swiftly to face the jerk, front legs braced, hind quarters on the ground.

The roped broncho felt the touch of the loop and, trained to it, tried to stop, but it was going too fast. Its front hoofs struck the soft earth of a buffalo wallow and permitted it to slide ahead. The jerk of the taut rope sent it into a somersault—to fall on its neck. There was an audible snap.

Its rider was more fortunate. He had foreseen what was happening in time to throw himself from the saddle. Rolling over, uninjured, he came to his feet with gun drawn. Murder was in his eyes.

Even before the jerk of the rope Slick, too, had dismounted. Now, without drawing, he stalked straight towards the threatening gun. His teeth were clamped together, so that the sides of his jaws protruded.

"You damned murderer!" he grated. "You thought you had him, didn't you? You and your friends have had something like this in mind ever since we made camp. You started those steers running, knowing we would be called to try to stop them. You knew Dave would hold his ground, expecting you to stop driving them crazy. But you had no intention of stopping. You knew, too, that that broncho you gave him couldn't be trusted."

The gun remained steadily pointing, but Slick ignored it.

It was Blue Pete prevented what would have been almost certain murder this time. He had hurried up as Slick dismounted. "Bes' drop that gat, Malsey," he warned. His own .45 was out. "Yuh done jes' wot he said. Now yuh gotta face the music. Drop it, I said."

Malsey's hand trembled for a moment, then fell slowly away and the gun dropped to the ground. He took a step backward.

Then Slick was on him. A fist crashed into his chin and Malsey went over backwards. But like a cat he was up. Two steps more to the rear, and his hand flew to his chaps for a second gun.

The half-breed was prepared for it. A bullet struck the gun as it lifted and knocked it away. Then Slick was on him again. He was too furious to realize what Blue Pete had done. Another blow sent Malsey reeling, and as he staggered to regain his footing the fist struck again. This time he fell. Though not unconscious, he made no attempt to rise but lay back, staring up at his antagonist with terrified eyes.

Slick reached down, jerked him to his feet, and struck again. But as he started to repeat, the half-breed's arms closed around him. Slick, he saw, was in a mood to kill.

For a few moments Slick struggled frantically to free himself, cursing and kicking, but he was helpless.

Suddenly he went limp. Blue Pete released him, and Slick turned. And a smile drove from his face every sign of the feral rage that had overpowered him.

"Thanks, Pete," he murmured. "I'm all right now."

The half-breed, feeling a little foolish, turned away. Slick followed and touched him on the shoulder. "I'm glad you were here. I'd have killed him—as he deserved. And I understand one doesn't do that sort of thing in this country."

CHAPTER VIII

BLUE PETE TAKES A HAND

IN THE excitement they had forgotten everyone else. Now they realized that there were spectators. A rush of racing bronchos brought the burly form of Tully Mason to the scene.

Slick heard them coming and mounted. He smiled, a suggestion of sadness in it, and turned to Blue Pete. "It looks like trouble already, Pete. I hoped it wouldn't come so soon. You'd better stay out of this. I can look after myself." He beckoned to Dave. "Stay here near me; we may need each other. No," as Dave looked about for assistance, "don't bring any more into it. If I can't handle this alone it would only make the mess greater to bring Buzz or Bill into it."

He frowned at the broncho he had roped; it lay motionless, its head twisted sideways. "A bad day for the T-Inverted R, isn't it? Allen'll decide that the new punchers are an expensive addition. Two dead bronchos. However, one of them proved to be useless for any job with cattle. The other? Well, perhaps I let myself go on it. I should have——"

"Yuh done wot I'd 'a' done myself—er I'd 'a' used a gat mebbe," Blue Pete interrupted. "The skunk desarved it—Malsey, I mean."

He had not taken his eyes from Malsey who had clambered to his feet and, still a trifle groggy, was staggering towards where one of his guns lay. "Bes' stick around, Malsey," he warned, "an' lea' them guns alone. They ain't hurtin' nobody whar they are, not even you. You 'n' them gats ain't good partners jes' now." He dismounted and picked up the guns. "I'll gi' them back when yuh ain't fit to make a fool o' yerself."

He mounted quickly as Tully and the rest of the out-

fit arrived. Then he sidled up close to Slick Jordan and waited.

Tully was cursing. "I seen what yu done, yu smart-aleck," he snarled. "Yu thought nobody seen yu, didn't yu? Yu killed them two broncs, deliberate." He had drawn in to a sliding stop almost against Smarty, and the steel-dust broncho pawed the earth as if impatient for some sort of command. Back of Tully were four of his men, all with guns in their hands. "Yu didn't think we seen yu."

Slick made no move to draw. His face was as calm as if nothing had happened. The smile remained.

"I hope you saw every move of it. I hope you won't forget what you and Malsey and the rest of you had in your minds all the time. So I don't need to make any excuses. Malsey was let off easily. I'd have killed him if it hadn't been for Blue Pete—killed him with my two hands. That's how I treat brutes who try to kill my friends. I'm telling you with the hope that you'll remember it."

"Dave should 'a' got outa the way," raged the foreman. The smile on Slick's face was driving him almost beyond control.

"Dave should never have had to try to get out of the way of anything, and you know it. Those scalawags were rushed towards him deliberately, knowing he'd try to stop them . . . knowing, too, that the bronc he had would be too terrified to move. I don't need to tell you any of this. The churn-heads you've given my boys to ride aren't fit to be around cattle. You chose them for us because of that. You wanted us to fail in our work, and you did your best to make us fail. Beyond that it was murder. Perhaps it's fortunate this happened so soon after the roundup started."

One of Tully's men shouted: "We kill brutes, too, that try to kill our friends."

Blue Pete forced Whiskers between Slick and Tully and faced the latter. "I seen it all, Tully," he said in a quiet voice. "Yuh knew all the time wot Malsey was tryin' to do—Malsey an' them others. Yuh knew that cayuse wudn' git outa the way in a pinch." His lip curled. "Yuh was tryin' to do suthin' yuh dassent do open-like."

"It's a damn' lie," shouted Tully.

Blue Pete wheeled the pinto alongside Tully's mount and reached out to touch him on the arm. He was very quiet about it, but something in his crooked eyes made Tully shrink before him and wheel his broncho away.

"Yuh bin tellin' me I'm lyin', Tully."

"No, no, I meant yu were wrong, 'cause I wasn't anywheres near, so how——"

"Bes' drop it, Tully," advised the half-breed, "er I'm apt to git real mad. After this when yuh wanta tell me I'm lyin' yuh bes' draw an' shoot quick. I jes' don't like it none."

"An' we don't like them fellers," said the foreman.

"Yuh ain' gotta tell nobody that. Yuh show it too dum plain. That's why Malsey here tried that dirty trick. But I'm tellin' yuh, Tully, it ain't no go. Not while I'm lookin'. Yuh kin swaller that the bes' way yuh kin, but I'm warnin' yuh nex' time I'm shootin'. An' nex' time yuh tell me I'm lyin', no matter how mad yuh are, yu 'n' me's both doin' some shootin'—that is, if *you* have time fer it."

Tully swallowed something he would have liked to say, and one of his men came to his relief: "Yu ain't got no right to butt in, Pete. This ain't none o' yer business."

"The roundup's anybody's business, Sluffy," replied the half-breed, "an' this is part o' the roundup. 'Sides, I ain't standin' fer no dirty work like that nowhar. I'm in it now, so thar's nothin' more to say."

Tully had partly recovered himself, and he had to save his face somehow. He pointed to the two dead bronchos. "An' who's payin' for them?" he asked. "What about them?"

Slick shrugged. "It's up to you to explain to Jim Allen, I suppose. And I'm not even interested in the story you tell. Malsey killed one as surely as if he had shot it. The other?" He laughed. "I suppose it died out of sympathy for a useless old friend." His expression sobered, and he faced Tully angrily. "You and your friends have been trying to ride herd on us ever since we joined the outfit. Well, we're mighty nasty scalawags when it comes to anything like that. If you're in a sod-pawing mood, come across the Border with me and

we'll have it out. I don't want to get the Mounties down on me here. Otherwise you'd better step back and keep your feet dry. I can stand only so much. I hope you understand that. You know what happened; you know how it was all planned. And you know we know you know. You knew what those scalawags would do, the way your men were driving them."

"Who said they were scalawags?" Tully demanded.

"I don't need to describe a scalawag to you, Tully. You wouldn't be foreman if you didn't know one when you saw it, and if you didn't know how it should be controlled." He turned towards the broncho he had roped. "That one? Malsey can thank his stars it wasn't he instead of the bronc. I could have broken his neck even more easily—and you know he deserved it."

Tully shifted his broncho backwards, scowling from Slick to Blue Pete. "Well, we ain't through yet. Before the round-up is over——"

The sound of an approaching horse turned their eyes towards it, and Sergeant Mahon rode up to them. He ignored them all except the foreman. Even the two dead bronchos appeared to draw not so much as a glance.

"I have something to say to Malsey," he snapped, "and don't interrupt till I'm through."

Malsey had crowded in close to Tully's broncho, but now he commenced to creep away.

"Stay where you are, Malsey," ordered the sergeant. "I'm talking to you. I saw what you attempted to do, and I should take you straight to town. That's what you deserve, and I know what the inspector would do to you. But perhaps you've learned a lesson, and at the moment I'm letting you go. But I'm not through with you yet." He turned to the foreman. "Tully, you appear to resent what I'm saying. All right, let's take it in to the inspector and let him decide. But I'm going to have my say here and now. There's been much about this whole affair from the beginning that I don't like, and I know the inspector would feel the same. I've seen what was threatened. That's why I'm keeping an eye on you. You're willing to break every rule of the roundup, every

cowboy rule, to satisfy the hatred you feel for these men. Well, I'm not having it. Slick Jordan and his friends have been hired by Jim Allen——"

Tully interrupted furiously, pointing at Slick. "Him—he ain't hired. We don't want him."

"He has Allen's permission to be around, I understand, and he has the say about it. As things are now, Slick has earned a place by preventing what was little short of attempted murder. If I reported it to the inspector, you and Malsey would probably face a few years in jail."

He turned his back on the foreman. "I don't condone all you did, either, Slick Jordan. In this country we're rather set on letting the law settle things; we don't like individuals taking the law into their own hands. Out here in the West sometimes, it's true, we have to interpret the law a little liberally, but we don't like strangers taking advantage of that. You did not need to rope that broncho, and you needn't have fought so viciously afterwards."

Slick's eyes flashed angrily. "He turned on me. He drew a gun."

"What would you have done in his position?"

"The same, yes—up to a point." A twinkle came into his eyes. "The difference would have been that I wouldn't have waited using it until I was knocked about. Also, Sergeant, he'd have done the same as I did, had he been in my position—unless he'd have shot right away. He was lucky there."

Blue Pete nodded. "Shure thing."

The sergeant frowned from one to the other. "I was too far away to see all that happened. I only saw you dismount and strike again and again." He pointed to the guns Blue Pete still held. "Whose are those?"

"Malsey's."

"Not Slick's. Where is his?"

The half-breed pointed to the gun in Slick's belt. "He never even drewed."

Slick looked a little embarrassed. "It didn't look to me like an incident that could be settled so swiftly. I wanted to smash the dog's face in. I was too mad to shoot."

Mahon nodded thoughtfully. "I think I have the whole story now. You, Tully, get your men out of this, and quickly. And remember that if there's any more trouble I'll be the one to make it—and we always have the last word. Slick, call your men in. Dave will get another mount from the remuda—and, Tully, one that knows its job. Malsey, you're through."

Tully's face went livid. "But—but we need every hand."

"You don't need—you're not going to have—a would-be murderer. I said Malsey was through. I meant it. He's out of the roundup. That's all. Now go."

Tully and his men turned sullenly away.

Mahon turned to Slick. "You're here only for the roundup, I hope. Do I have your promise?"

Slick stiffened. "I'm promising nothing. I'm not going to be frightened away, not even by the Mounted Police."

Mahon smiled indulgently. "You don't appear yet to know much about the Mounted Police, do you? If I told you to go, you'd have to go—either back where you came from, or into town with me. I'm not going to order you to leave, since it would play into Tully's hands."

Slick protested: "But, Sergeant, I can't see that I deserve to be ordered out of the country. I don't believe the Mounted Police will be that unfair. I promised to remain for the roundup, and I never yet turned tail. How long we remain afterwards I can't say. My intention was to go right away afterwards, and if that big bully of a foreman will let us, I still will go. I don't intend even to appear frightened—if you understand what I mean."

"I do." Mahon was uncomfortably conscious of something about Slick that attracted him. "All I'm interested in is peace. I believe you can look after yourself, you and your men. But it makes more work for me, because Tully Mason will never forget."

Slick's laugh was not pleasant to hear. "I'd hate to think he would. I can see prospects of quite a bit of fun ahead."

The sergeant frowned but said nothing. As he rode away he beckoned Blue Pete to him. "I'm not going to ask anything more about what happened," he said, "but I'm worried

because—because I rather like that fellow . . . and I don't know what he's up to. Do you?"

Blue Pete's head shook from side to side several times. "Danged ef I don't like him myself. Jes' now I'm 'memberin' thar's lots o' tramp punchers wanderin' about across the Border . . . but mebbe that ain't all."

"Perhaps you're right—either way," muttered the sergeant.

CHAPTER IX

SERGEANT MAHON INTERVENES

SERGEANT MAHON knew that he dare not leave it there. He knew the sort of men he had to deal with. In the long semi-idle hours of the average cowboy anger grows with brooding, and slight affronts become unendurable insults. Handicapped in giving voice to their feelings, action became the only means of relieving themselves of a sense of injustice or unsatisfied protest.

Tully Mason in particular. He was not the sort to forget, and the fact that he had lost some face before his own men would call for something desperate. There was, too, to be avenged the beating Malsey had received. It was not to be thought that a foreigner should be allowed to get away with that. The honour of the T-Inverted R was involved, and it was on that account that Tully would expect and receive the support of other outfits.

The basis of the feeling against Slick and his friends was not difficult to find. Newcomers to the West were expected to "ride low" until they were accepted. It was presumed that they had much to learn, whatever their background. As newcomers they were expected to recognize the standing of the old-timers. This Slick had not done—had, indeed, laughed at it. It was certain to bring dislike.

Mahon, unable to follow the popular course, recognized the fact that Slick was aware of the local custom and had bristled against it, acting the rôle of a show-off, ridiculing and defying the attitude of the other cowboys and thereby aggravating it.

As a Mounted Policeman it was his duty to forestall the trouble he saw approaching, and he set about doing what he could. He paid Texas a visit and told his story. "That's all I know about it, but I saw that much. Blue Pete can give you

the rest. I purposely avoided asking him for more details, because I don't want to make the affair register too deeply with him. I'd rather not have him involved in any way."

Texas listened gravely. "What do yu want me to do, Sergeant?"

Mahon had little advice to give. "You can handle this your own way. At least it will show you that you'll have to keep your eyes open. If trouble comes or threatens too immediately you'll know where it starts. You must act on that. I'll leave it to you for the present."

Texas talked it over with the half-breed. When he had the complete story he shook his head gloomily. "That's serious. I knew somethin' was going to happen. The split in the T-Inverted R is more serious than if they were two seperate outfits. . . . Them new punchers was certain to cause trouble."

"But it wasn't Slick's fault," Blue Pete protested.

"I ain't sayin' it was . . . this time. But they just don't fit in. They're too—too smart. Slick sure earns his name, and it doesn't go out here. There isn't an outfit in the West they'd fit into, the way they act." He glowered at the ground for a few moments, his head shaking. "There ain't much I can do about it. Jim Allen needs 'em; the roundup needs 'em. Anyway, they were hired. Surely they can last for the roundup."

"But the roundup's goin' to be durn slow," grumbled the half-breed. "It'll give lots o' time fer more dirty work from Tully. But it's your trouble, Tex. Thar ain't nobody but the Mounties kin butt in on yuh."

Texas kicked at a tumbleweed. "That don't make it easier for me. . . . The sergeant was talkin' to me about it. He sees what's apt to happen, and he left it to me, damn him!"

"He sent Malsey packin'."

"But Malsey ain't the one we gotta fear. It's Tully. There'll be trouble all right, but I don't know what Tully's apt to do, so I can't take steps to stop it. Blast it! I know Tully Mason." He spat noisily. "Who the devil are these new punchers, anyway? I can't see what they're doin' over here, just for a roundup. They're too smart to need the money

they'll make, and Slick ain't drawin' any. All he's doin' is tryin' to amuse the boys with that thingumabob he plays. . . . And the funny part of it is he's a real puncher, too."

"He ain't paid nothin'," said Blue Pete, "but he's workin' jes' the same—helpin' his own chaps out. Shure he's a real puncher. I seen the way he throwed that rope."

"Well, we'll soon find out—about everything," the captain sighed. "All I see I can do is watch 'em all, and I'm too busy for that. . . . I gotta do somethin' more."

He whistled to one of his men nearby and ordered his broncho. "Reckon I'll run out now and look things over . . . I gotta keep 'em separate, somehow."

He mounted and rode away along the lakeshore. At the end of the lake he was joined by the sergeant.

"Did you get Blue Pete's version of it, Tex?" inquired Mahon.

Texas nodded gloomily. "I'm lookin' it over now. . . . I gotta be fair, and Blue Pete says it wasn't Slick's fault mostly."

"Was any of it his fault?"

Texas cleared his throat uneasily. "Well, we gotta look after our own boys, yu know."

"Not if it means being unfair to anyone. I don't wish to interfere, Texas—it would be better for everything to be done under your authority—but I can't stand by and see the blame thrown on the innocent one."

"But yu just can't like them new fellows," Texas protested. "They ain't fittin' in . . . and Slick just jeers about it."

"But until he does something wrong you can't take sides against him." The sergeant rode for a time in silence, then: "I know how you feel. Sometimes I feel the same. Slick's a likeable chap in so many ways, and in other ways he's an irritation. I've a feeling that when he knows he isn't liked he deliberately irritates. It's a form of defiance. To Tully it's a sort of challenge. It's too bad, I know, because that smile of Slick's, his good looks, his very courage and recklessness, make him likeable. He can do so many things superlatively well. . . . It surprised me how calmly he took that affair, after going completely berserk with Malsey. Once

Blue Pete had him quieted down he appeared almost to take it as a joke. That's what maddened Tully so much. And that's what you must take into consideration. What do you plan to do?"

Texas shook his head doubtfully. "I've been thinking it over. I don't want the—the mixup to get out of hand. I don't want to make it seem more serious than it is. . . . I know I must keep them apart . . . somehow, but I can't move one of them to another part of the range or everyone 'ud know there was trouble. I've been thinkin' I'd give Slick and his bunch the section here right next the Hills. Tully'll be outside him. They needn't have much to do with each other that way. Slick hasn't made many friends, so he should feel better with no one on one side of him."

Mahon was not quite satisfied. "I told you I'd ordered Malsey away. I tried to induce Slick to go, too, but he refused." He laughed shortly. "One couldn't help admiring him for it: he wouldn't be frightened away. . . . Well, there doesn't seem much else to do for the present, so we'll let it go at that."

They had come within sight of three small herds moving slowly northward towards the general herd. Behind came the cowboys, riding languidly. Contentedly enough the cattle came on, the herds edging nearer and nearer and finally merging. The cowboys saw the sergeant and Texas and drew together, evidently conversing.

Mahon and the captain moved aside to let the cattle through, and when the last had passed they closed in beside Tully Mason.

Texas leaped immediately to the point: "Slick Jordan and his boys are to work the part there next the Hills. You and your men will take this part next them to the west."

Tully glanced swiftly at him and grunted: "Damn good thing for them. It'll save 'em from what's comin' to 'em—perhaps."

The sergeant rode nearer. "I don't like that kind of talk, Tully, and what's more I won't have it. If there's trouble from now on I'll know where it starts, and that'll mean that I'll go back to what you attempted yesterday."

"I didn' attempt nothin'," Tully growled.

Texas broke in: "It'll be all right now, Sergeant. They won't need to meet, so you needn't worry."

The sergeant was finding difficulty in stifling his anger. "I'll not forget what you said, Tully, so bear it in mind."

The foreman ignored him. Turning to his men, he laughed. "That damn' Yank ain't goin' to bother us no more, boys, so it ain't so bad. But," he added, with a scowl at Texas, "they still gotta eat at the chuck-wagon—or they'll get their grub there. They ain't sleepin' there, thank God. They bunk in the Hills—with their animals. They know what everyone thinks of them."

Texas was relieved. "That's fine." He looked about. "Where are they now?"

Tully pointed towards the end of the Hills. "They bin workin' out jus' what yu planned—they've kept to themselves over there since yesterday. They got some sense."

The sergeant and Texas rode away towards the Hills. The range there was more broken, with heavily rolling ground, with small bluffs of cottonwood trees in some of the coulees. For a time they saw no one, but, suddenly emerging on a height, they looked down into a deep depression. Below them were two small herds, only a few yards apart and controlled by Slick and two of his friends.

Slick looked up and saw them immediately, and the two herds melted together.

From the corner of his eyes Mahon glanced at Texas but said nothing, and they rode down into the coulee. Texas made straight for Slick, but the sergeant swung off to one side and moved around the herd, examining the brands as he went. He noticed that several—he figured they had made up the smaller of the two herds—bore the 3-Bar-Y brand.

Slick had not taken his eyes from him, and when the sergeant came nearer he made a grimace. "Nothing like standing in with the captain," he said. "Those are your cows, Texas. We're inclined to treat them with every consideration." His laugh made it appear as a foolish joke.

Texas scarcely smiled. "Oh, bring 'em all in. We'll cut 'em out ourselves. Anyway, they'll all go together to the train." His expression went colder. "In the roundup I'm only captain, not the 3-Bar-Y foreman, so don't be silly. Treat 'em all alike." A thought appeared to strike him, for he glowered at Slick. "Does that mean that you're not treating the T-Inverted R cows right?"

Slick shrugged. "Any feelings I have about the T-Inverted R boys I'm not apt to take out on the cows. Don't worry about that. We're paid—or my boys are—to work for Jim Allen. We're doing that work properly, I believe. I confess there's every reason to be nasty. Tully's trying to ride herd on us still. If it were over in the States we'd soon settle that, but here," with a glance at the sergeant, "I'm letting Tully make the first move. Anything I do must be done in self-defence. It would be easy to pick a fight with him—and it would finish it—all in self-defence. But I'm not even doing that. Just the same, Sergeant, you saw how he hates us, so that we're surely justified in being prepared. We're not going to give him a chance to kill any of us again."

"You don't need to worry now," Texas told him. "I've fixed it so you and your boys will have this part next the Hills. Tully and his men will be off there to the west of you."

Slick was so delighted that Mahon watched him with growing bewilderment. He knew the cowboy did not know the meaning of fear, yet for some reason the new arrangement appeared to lift a load from his mind.

"Suits us to the ground," said Slick. "We can look after everything that moves at this end of the Hills. There won't be a cow missed—I hope." He turned his eyes for a moment towards the forest at the top of the long slope. "It's going to mean a lot of work, more than our share, because we've already discovered that the cows make for the Hills to escape us, and we have to find them and rout them out. Indeed, it'll mean quite a bit of work right in the Hills. But you won't need to complain that we neglect anything. Just because you may not be able to see us won't mean we're loafing. We'll probably be up there in the Hills sweating our hearts out after inconsiderate cows . . . but so long as we don't

have to keep one eye on Tully all the time, we'll do our work."

A jumble of thoughts had raced through Sergeant Mahon's mind as he listened. "You say 'we,'" he said. "Has Allen hired you now?"

Slick shook his head. "I couldn't bring myself to take money from anyone who'd employ Tully Mason. That's the kind of cuss I am. No, I'm still only tagging along, helping my boys. There are only four of us, you know. It means two to a trick—one unpaid. It's hard on Smarty, because I won't use any of the churnheads they offer us. We'll all use our own bronchos more than they should be used, but that's forced on us."

"I could make them give you better cowponies," Texas offered.

"We wouldn't take them if you had to ask for them. I'm not begging anything from the T-Inverted R—or Tully Mason. We can do as good work with the dopes they give us as they'll do with their better broncs. No, we don't want any further dealings with Tully."

He turned to the sergeant. "In some ways I'm sorry about yesterday, Sergeant. I lost my head. I've got a temper, and when something like that happens——"

"You managed to pull through it without making me do anything about it," Mahon interrupted. "So long as you do your work right you won't have any trouble with us."

Slick grinned. Sooner or later everything became to him a joke. "And when I get into trouble I'll streak for the Border. Smarty'll get me to it in time. There isn't a bronc in the country that can outrun him."

"If you're so sure of that," suggested the sergeant, "you'd better bring him over to the Hat when we have the race around the town. We have a few bronchos we consider fast, and we've always managed to beat the best Montana sends. There's a little pinto, for instance. It won the last race."

"I know that pinto. It's the one Blue Pete rides."

"It's the fastest thing in these parts," declared the sergeant. Slick nodded thoughtfully. "And you think I'd have to have a long lead to get away from her, eh? Well, I'd like to put

Smarty up against her at any time, in any place . . . but I'd hate to be chased."

"You'd be caught, if you were," declared Mahon confidently.

"Not on your life, Sergeant. I'd stake my life on that—though I hope I never have to."

"I certainly hope so, too," said the sergeant.

CHAPTER X

A NIGHT ADVENTURE

FOR ANOTHER day nothing happened. It looked as if quick tempers might have had a chance to cool off, that everyone had settled down to the business of the roundup. Slick and his friends were seldom seen. They picked up their food at the chuck-wagon and retired with it, sometimes carrying off enough for a whole day. Their camp they made within the Hills.

When they did come to the chuck-wagon their conduct was exemplary: they always waited at the end of the line and were careful to speak to no one but the cook. Every rule of the roundup, even everything expected of the newcomer, they scrupulously observed.

Always early in the morning a pair was on hand for orders.

They made no more complaints about their mounts, but their own bronchos were shamefully overworked, sometimes almost to exhaustion. These they never threw in the remuda but kept in the Hills.

Tully and his friends were less considerate. Frequent contemptuous remarks were muttered, but no attention was paid to them, though at times Slick's jaw hardened, his teeth came together, and a look came into his eyes that boded ill for anyone who roused him further. The cook, an old man, took pity on them and rather favoured them, a fact that did not increase their popularity.

It was on the night of the third day that things happened that threatened the peace of the roundup.

Blue Pete had kept pretty much to himself from the first. He rode about a lot and was usually in sight from some part of the ranges that were being combed for the fat steers. More often than elsewhere he hovered about the T-Inverted R section, though he never stopped to talk. When or where he slept no

one knew—or cared. It was taken for granted that he retired to his favourite haunt, the Hills.

It had always been the same with him. With a comfortable house at the 3-Bar-Y and a wife he adored, he more often spent the night in the Hills, sometimes in one of the many caves with which he was familiar, more often in the open.

The cowboys had become accustomed to his sudden appearances and disappearances, though not one of them was aware of the work he surreptitiously performed for the Mounted Police. Working in secret he was able to accomplish more than an official of the Force—which he could not be since a judge had refused to accept his evidence because he had once been a rustler. Inspector Barker found much use for him, reluctantly recognizing that the half-breed's unorthodox methods often accomplished what was impossible to the handicapped Mounted Police.

So little did the public know of their connection that the West believed that in his heart—and probably during his disappearances—he was still rustling. It was a reputation the Inspector dare do little to kill. It explained to the public the intermittent disappearances, as well as his visits to the barracks where the inspector was supposed to keep track of him and his activities.

Two things about it worried the official. The first was the half-breed's unorthodox methods, the second that if he got himself into trouble the inspector would not be in a position to help him—would even be forced to disclaim all responsibility and concern.

On the night of the third day Blue Pete had ridden down from the Hills in the darkness towards the camps. He had come out of the north-west corner and he circled widely around the north end of Elk Lake. To the south he was in danger of running into the night-herds or someone about the camps might see him. He wished to meet no one, though he could not have explained why. As he neared the chuck-wagons he swung away more widely to the west to escape the remudas feeding in that direction.

Almost as if the darkness were no obstacle—he could see well in the dark—he avoided the herds and the night-riders.

The cattle had settled down. He could hear them sighing, could hear the gurgling of a thousand cuds. It was music to his ears, for he had always lived with cattle.

After midnight—it had been dark for less than two hours—he found himself back near the south end of the lake, and he rode more quietly. Whiskers understood. She had lived a lifetime of soundless movement on occasion, when her life and her master's depended on it. She seemed to be able to avoid every revealing crackle, and the half-breed always kept his saddle too well oiled to creak, a sound that might carry for half a mile and more on a still night.

Whiskers was uneasy; her ears kept flicking forward and back.

It carried to the half-breed. "Hear suthin', ole gal?" he whispered. "Ain't heerd nothin' muhself . . . but you know thar's suthin' off thar ahead a bit. Listen."

The pinto stopped and they both seemed to hold their breath.

Blue Pete heard it then—slight movement. It was something that demanded attention, for the camps were off to the left and behind him now, and no herds were near.

"Shure thing, ole gal," he whispered. "Le's git over this way a bit." He swung the pinto away.

It carried him farther from the chuck-wagons, but long before he was close enough to the sleeping herds to startle them he turned back and went straight south. After a time he rounded in towards the Hills.

He stopped then and listened once more. This time he heard the sounds more plainly, and he knew they were made by horses, and horses with riders.

Whiskers had been signalling to him for some time, and now she turned her head to the left, her ears stiffly pointed forward.

The half-breed touched her understandingly on the shoulder and slowly guided her more to the south. Against the sky rose the dark mass of the forest topping the slope, and he eyed it questioningly. He was uneasy. Mounted men ahead of him and in the night! Where were they going?

The night was breathlessly still. The cattle were now too far away to be audible. The coyotes, frightened by the life

of the roundup, were silent. The night-herds, content to let the cattle lie, had stopped riding around them.

Blue Pete listened as he rode, not towards the mounted riders who had first aroused his curiosity, but off to the left where Whiskers had warned him something should be investigated.

In a coulee he dismounted. "Gotta find out wot 'tis, ole gal," he murmured. "I didn' hear nothin', but I know yu did, an' that's 'nuff fer me. Reckon I gotta go keerful now, 'cause I ain't goin' to hev your ears. Stay here 'less I whistle fer yuh."

He crept off into the darkness. The night was cloudless, and every star was a blazing light to one striving to move about on the prairie unseen. There was no moon, however, and the half-breed had learned to trust to his eyes and ears to warn him of danger. Back he picked his way to where Whiskers had warned him to be careful. He kept close to the ground, that no one on horseback might see him against the sky. He avoided the higher levels as much as possible, and when he could not he crawled over them on his stomach. Not far before him, he knew, were scattered trees, and he made for them, working from one to another within their shadows. The lake was not far away now, and he began to fear he had missed what Whiskers had heard.

In the shadow of a gnarled cottonwood he paused to consider the next step. He might return and bring the pinto nearer to help, but in unknown danger he preferred to move about without her. She furnished too large a target. He remembered those riders he had heard. They were out of hearing now, and he worried about them. He had no time to lose, yet he dared not go on until he had discovered what had disturbed the pinto.

He moved onward a few steps.

The slightest of rustles brought him up sharply where he stood. He had not, he felt certain, been seen, but he feared the keen senses of a broncho. The rustle was not repeated and he had not definitely located it.

Presently he heard it again, and he recognized it as the shuffle of a broncho's hoofs. Then came the sound of plucking

grass. It was only a few yards away in the shadows. A broncho—and no loose bronchos were in that section. He listened. Again the sound came, slightly off to the left, among the trees. Someone stifled a yawn.

The half-breed tingled with excitement. It struch him suddenly that it might be Slick Jordan. But why? Anyone in that spot called for attention—and probably action, whether it was Slick or not. Cautiously he crept towards the sound, verging away to get the broncho between him and the sheen of the lake. Out from the shadows he had to be careful. He reached another tree.

He could see them now against the lake—the broncho, and in the saddle was a man. What was he doing there?

He did not wait for an answer, even in his own mind. Instead he crept towards the man. Step by step he advanced. He feared the broncho, but it had its back to him now. Nevertheless he must be prepared for instant action. He held his breath.

Four yards to the broncho—a mere five steps. And then the animal snorted and tried to turn. The movement startled and warned its rider. But as he tried to control the broncho and at the same time look behind, Blue Pete was on him. An arm wound about his throat, pressing hard, and jerked him from his saddle. With his other hand the half-breed caught the rope attached to the horn and held on.

The cowboy gasped. The broncho leaped away. With all his weight Blue Pete jerked, and the strap holding the rope gave way.

Even if he had any breath for it, the cowboy was too frightened to call out. For a moment he did not resist, but as the broncho pulled away he came to life. Desperately he fought. Blue Pete clung to him, but with only one arm he was forced to release the pressure on the other's throat. And still no cry for help.

It told the half-breed something he had not previously considered—that the cowboy did not want to call out. There would be no help he wanted. It meant that something serious was afoot, and Blue Pete knew that he had done well to attack.

He did not wish to be recognized, and he worked swiftly. In a few seconds the cowboy was helpless in the rope. His neckerchief was unwound from his neck and stuffed in his mouth, and thus bound he was left.

The half-breed's excitement had been mounting as pictures flooded before his mind. He had less time than ever now to waste. And with the excitement was a vast amount of worry. He ran to where he had left the pinto, mounted, and set straight off up the slope towards the Hills.

CHAPTER XI

THE ATTACK IN THE HILLS

HE SENT the pinto ahead as fast as he dare. He could hear nothing now, but he had kept in his mind the direction from which the sounds had come and that was enough. For some reason that he did not stop to analyse he was not only excited but anxious.

At the foot of the slope that led to the Hills he pulled in to listen.

Yes, concentrating on it, he could hear them now. They were well up the slope and still moving on towards the height.

That was enough. He swung to the south, edging up the slope and moving faster and faster. He took a chance of being heard, but he had no time to be more cautious.

When he reached the trees he dismounted.

He patted the pinto on the neck and for a moment or two fondled her ears. "Yuh gotta stick right here, ole gal," he told her. "I kin git 'long better alone fer wot I gotta do. Ef they come this way yuh kin look after yerself. S'long!"

He took his rifle from the saddle-sheath and hurried into the forest.

He worked towards the north-east. In the gloom of the trees his sharp eyes served him well, but to help him most was the instinct that all his life had enabled him to move about, even in the dark, with the minimum of noise. He was like a wild animal, so often had his very life depended on silence.

He knew the Cypress Hills better than anyone else. There at the western end in particular he could almost have found any part blindfolded. Something in the air, or the odour, or the rise and fall of the ground, located him, and he hurried ahead without hesitation, avoiding trees, the snap of dead branches, the crunch of fallen leaves.

He was aware of life ahead of him for some time before hearing it. That, too, had become an instinct, and he never questioned it. Then in the distance he heard low voices, their very cautiousness filling in the spaces in the story he had commenced to picture. Nearer and nearer he crept.

Men were conversing in low tones, so that he was forced to get nearer to hear what was said. At first it had come into his mind that he might have stumbled on Slick Jordan's camp, though that scarcely justified the whispering voices he heard.

He recognized those voices now. Tully Mason was there, and he appeared to be giving instructions. Others of the T-Inverted R he was able to pick out. But there were more, many more, and it increased his anxiety as he listened. Tully had worked the ground well.

No need to listen further, and he had no time. What he had pictured long ago he knew now to be more than imagination. The night-riders before him had left that guard to protect their rear, the cowboy he had left helpless back on the prairie.

The men had dismounted. Blue Pete moved silently away to the east and waited just long enough to be certain. He heard the band of men start forward. They had left their bronchos and were working steadily but stealthily ahead. Plainly they knew where they were going, the exact spot—and there they had an advantage over Blue Pete. He had purposely not concerned himself with the location of Slick's camp. So far as he knew it was none of his business, and if Slick wished privacy there was no reason as yet to break in on it. Besides, he had no wish to have Slick think him interested—not until he knew a lot more things than he did. At any time he would be able to find the camp if it was necessary.

Moving onward as swiftly as he dared, he circled the band of men. In the darkness he could move more quickly than they.

Keeping to the direction the men were taking, he hurried ahead of them, his anxiety growing. Unless they were moving directly towards Slick's camp he might not reach it before them.

After a time a faint odour of smoke reached him, and he smiled with relief. Suddenly he came out on the bank of a ravine. Below him he could make out the dying embers of a camp-fire, and in that fire was a story; it had been built of dry twigs, so that little smoke would be made. Over the fire a rude wire rack for cooking was thrust into the ground.

But no one was in sight. It did not surprise him. Slick Jordan was much too cunning to sleep beside a fire. It did, however, add something to the questions in his mind.

Cautiously he descended the bank, investigating every shadow, watching for movement. At a venture he turned at the bottom of the ravine and worked towards the left.

In a few moments he knew there were bronchos near. He could smell them, and a low snort was instantly cut off, proving that a human hand had acted swiftly. At the same time he read another of Slick's tricks—to sleep close to his bronchos. It would be difficult to surprise him then, for the bronchos would hear anyone approaching.

He saw them then. Under the bank, on a thick bed of ever-green boughs, three men lay in a triangle, the head of each on the ankles of another to keep their heads from the damp ground.

Blue Pete stopped. He knew someone was awake and had heard him, but he did not wish to conceal himself now. What was in his mind more vividly was that this little group had long lived in danger and in the open. It surprised him that he had come on them so easily. Tonight they had no herd to guard and were sleeping.

He knew Slick was not one of the three, knew that he was watching from the shadows. Then a blinding light flashed into his eyes, and a soft voice from the greater darkness reached him.

"I wouldn't take even one step farther," it said. "I have you covered. Now come where I can see you better."

The half-breed, shading his eyes with one hand, stepped forward.

Slick laughed. But in the laugh was a warning. "Oh, my old friend, Blue Pete! . . . Or I *thought* he was my friend.

More and more I realize that I'm in a strange country. I'm not as smart as I thought I was. This damned country is getting under my skin."

The three in the triangle had not been asleep. They sat up, and Blue Pete heard their guns click. He faced the light.

"Turn it off, Slick," he urged. "This ain't no time to try to frighten me. Tully 'n' some o' the boys is comin', an' tha're comin' quiet an' with thur guns. He's still got that score to settle."

The light snapped off, and Slick came nearer. "You mean they're going to attack us?"

"Shure. Ain't no other reason I kin see. I follered 'em fer a time, then I come ahead. Tha're only a few minutes away. Bes' git outa here, an' durn quick."

The laugh that broke from Slick's lips was not pleasant to hear. "God, I never looked for a chance like this! I, too, have a score to settle. Thanks, Pete. This will settle everything just dandy. Do you want to be in on the slaughter?"

Blue Pete scowled at him. "'Tain't so easy as that."

Dave, the cowboy who had so narrowly escaped the scalawags, laughed shortly. "You'll see how easy it is. Reckon you ain't smelled powder before—not our powder. This is our chance——"

"Yuh're the wrong side of the Border for that sort of thing," Blue Pete protested. "Slick, yuh dassent do it, not here. I come from over thar, an' I know the difference. Here yuh on'y shoot to save yer life."

"Well, could there ever be an occasion where that defence would hold more perfectly?" Slick asked.

"But yuh got time to git away. I've warned yuh, an' that makes the difference. I didn' want yuh to be murdered. Yuh jes' can't do it, Slick."

Dave growled, "Who's goin' to stop us?"

"Reckon I gotta."

"Ha, ha! One ag'in four. Fat chance——"

"Shut up!" That was Slick, and he meant it.

For a few moments no one spoke, then Slick sighed. "It's

got us by the short hair, boys. Blue Pete's right, and he has the say this time. This isn't our chance to get even. We must find other times and other ways . . . ways that won't get us into trouble with the Mounted Police."

Blue Pete broke in impatiently. "Dang it, yuh ain' got no time to gabble. Git outa this."

Slick had been thinking. Now he laughed softly. "All right, Pete, there'll be no one hurt—unless they hurt themselves. But you won't mind us having a little fun with them, will you?"

"Wachu going to do?"

"I've promised they won't be hurt."

The half-breed's sharp ears had heard what escaped the others, and he whispered excitedly, "Git goin'. Quick."

Back into the ravine darkness he faded, crossed it, and climbed the other side. He did not want to be at hand for anything that happened. As he reached the top of the bank he could hear Tully and his friends on the other side of the ravine.

A breathless silence ensued for a short time. Tully had seen the fire and was trying to locate Slick and his friends in the darkness. The fact that they were nowhere in sight would disturb him. The nerves of them all would be on edge anyway, and they would wonder—and dread. Was it the game of the hounds and the fox in reverse?

Tully was in now too deep to retire, yet he did not know what to do. The group had scattered along the bank, and he could not reach them all to give orders. He could only wait—and hope for some means of escaping the mess into which he saw he had tumbled.

The means came. A rifle shot crashed into the darkness. It brought a wild blast of shots that had no targets, that expressed merely the panic in Tully's followers.

Then they turned and ran, Tully in the lead, shooting wildly as they ran. Not a thought in their minds now but to escape a dark and avenging forest they had always feared and avoided. Anything now to get back to the open prairie they understood. They had neither opportunity nor mind to choose their route.

Slick's taunting laugh broke through it. Then silence.

Long minutes later, as Blue Pete trotted grinningly back towards the place where he had left Whiskers, a new noise broke out, the mad gallop of terrified bronchos. And he knew their owners had not had time to reach them.

He continued to laugh as he ran. Slick was having his fun. And yet—and yet there would be tomorrow.

CHAPTER XII

BLUE PETE AND MIRA

THE SELECTION of fat steers for the market continued throughout the following day, but within the memory of the West there had never been anything like it before. Outwardly it was the same, but in part it was that that made it so well worth remembering.

In the first place a few score of punchers continued to ride as usual, but with odd silences and outbreaks of raucous laughter. Some of the cowboys were unusually morose and gloomy, but there were others who had only to look at them to break into outbursts of chuckling. The laughing ones had either not been invited, or had refused to take part in Tully Mason's affair of the previous night. Nevertheless they seemed to know the story and to find in it much ground for wordless but pointed amusement.

The T-Inverted R bore the brunt of it, of course, since they had all been involved, and the only visible effect on them was an unwonted briskness in their work, as if they were too busy to talk—accompanied by a grimness that challenged any open teasing.

But they went about their business without their best bronchos. For some reason that was never put into words these fine animals were missing. Throughout the day most of them were picked up, running loose on the prairie, the balance the following day—all saddled and bridled.

The one that was not found was Tully's special, a broncho called Pal.

Later it was found, but that is part of the story.

Though no one spoke of the attack, everyone appeared to have the story. It certainly did not come from the T-Inverted R—they were too ashamed to speak of it even among themselves—yet even before noon of the following day everyone knew of

it. Perhaps the universal silence was based on the thought that it should not reach the ears of Sergeant Mahon.

The story? Well, not exactly the complete story. Only Slick and his friends and, in part, Blue Pete, could have told that. None of the participants was proud of the part he had played, nor was it possible to blame the dénouement on anyone but themselves, since they were only too conscious of the panic in which they had all taken to their heels when the shooting started.

What details were missing, however, were filled in from the fertile imaginations of those who had played no part in the affair, and that did not add to the peace of mind of those who had. Effective embroidery to the real truth was hard on the reputations of Tully and his men. The result was that right to the end of the roundup, indeed to the prairie fire that followed, the very sight of the T-Inverted R punchers was apt to arouse laughter. And no one can inject so much meaning into laughter as a cowboy.

There was nothing the T-Inverted R could do about it, but that did not improve their tempers. So galling did the laughter become that there were times when Tully thought of affecting illness in order to get away from it. Only the knowledge that the laughter would then be more frank and unrestrained prevented it. Besides, there was Pal to consider. He could not leave Pal—wherever the broncho was.

On Slick and his friends it seemed to have no effect. Their position had been delicate from the first. It was no less delicate now, of course, but Tully and his friends dare not face the teasing, even the disapproval, that would meet any open display of hatred now, for the cowboy is in general essentially fair. Also it would accomplish nothing at the moment but encourage the frank and contemptuous ridicule of Slick Jordan. To answer that ridicule would bring Sergeant Mahon on their heads.

No one appeared to have any reason to believe that Mahon had heard anything, but it was noticed that he was always in evidence during the following day or two.

Texas had the story in its many versions, and he was wise enough at first to pay no attention to it. So long as it did not

interfere with the course of the roundup it did not concern him, and since no one appeared to have been hurt he was content to let things run along until something else turned up to force him to intervene. Nevertheless it hung over him like a cloud, for he knew the end had not yet come. So far as the missing bronchos were concerned, that was a matter for the ranches that owned them, though he would have to see that what remained were adequate for the job. Tully had sent to the ranch for more.

On a flying trip to the 3-Bar-Y Blue Pete carried his chuckles.

Mira, his white wife, read in his face that something had happened, and when he continued to chuckle without explaining, she became impatient.

"Well"—she faced him, her little hands clenched on her hips—"you might let me laugh with you, Pete."

He told the story then, the version of it that no one else could have told, and though there were moments when she smiled, at the end her head shook gravely.

"Perhaps, dear, you laugh too soon."

He sobered. "Whachu mean?"

"The roundup isn't over yet, is it?"

"'Tain't much more'n started, an' the cows is durn hard to handle."

"How long do you think it'll take?"

He pouted his lips thoughtfully. "More'n a week at the best."

"Then you've got more than a week of trouble before you."

He pondered that scowlingly. "Shure . . . shure. I ain't bin thinkin' o' that."

"Then you'd better—you and the sergeant."

"Yuh think it's apt to be that serious—got to bring the sergeant into it?"

Her lip curled. "Did you think you wouldn't have to? Of course the Mounted Police are going to be in it—from now on. Neither Tully nor this Slick Jordan are satisfied. . . . The only thing that would have completed any part of it was if you had let Slick do what he thought of doing first."

"But there'd 'a' bin a lot killed . . . 'most murder, that. Anyways the Mounties wudn' 'a' stood fer it."

"I'm not saying you should have done that. . . . But now Tully Mason is more dangerous than ever. They're both biding their time—watching for a chance to settle the score. You can be sure of that. Watch out for it."

He frowned into the riding-boot he had removed. "Thar ain't nothin' I kin do, is thar?"

She regarded him thoughtfully, almost reprovingly—helplessly at the end. "You might stay out of the whole thing."

"But I—I——"

"I know." She sighed. "At any rate you might tell the whole story to the sergeant and leave it to him."

He shook his head stubbornly. "I ain't doin' that. . . . 'Course yuh kin bet he'll pick the story up 'thout me. It's all over the range awready. The sergeant'll know what to do about it."

She made a scornful sound. "But you won't leave it to him."

"Wal, I done my best, didn' I?"

She walked away and returned. "Who is this Slick Jordan?"

"I dunno."

"But you seem to like him."

He grinned sheepishly. "I—I sorta do. He's a puncher Jim Allen hired fer the roundup."

"Is that all you know about him?"

"Wal-l, tha're tramp punchers—wanderin' about. Come over from Montany. Bin ridin' down south somewhars by thur outfits. Lots o' punchers ridin' 'bout like that these days," he added defensively.

"In groups? With a concertina? With the tricks you say they do?"

"Some o' the tricks I kin do muhself. The rope twirlin' an' that. An' thar's lots I kin do I bet Slick can't do."

"Are you a wandering puncher?" she scoffed. "No, there's more to them than that."

He settled himself comfortably beside the window, his stockinged feet resting on another chair, and stared off up the ranch trail. Mira busied herself with the meal.

After a long pause he said: "Reckon yuh're right—thar's bound to be trouble, an' trouble ain't nothin' to laugh at, not

in a roundup. Mebbe I bes' git right back an' keep an eye on things, sorta. Tully'll need some watchin'."

"And that Slick Jordan, too," she suggested.

"Oh, shure, shure, 'cause he's new. . . . But Tully's shure to be in any trouble thar is, an' he's easier to watch. Slick? . . . I dunno. Sorta think he's earned wot he calls himself. 'Tain't goin' to be easy to keep an eye on him, ef he do' wanta be watched. He's a cute 'un."

She came and stood beside him, frowning down on him. "Of course you're bound to be in any trouble there is. You can smell trouble from here to Montana—and you always make straight for it. But for heaven's sake, can't you leave this to Sergeant Mahon? You know you don't like Tully Mason, and that's going to make it dangerous for you. And this Slick Jordan—he's not your affair. If anything happens to him——"

"I do' want nothin' to happen to him. I—I sorta like Slick Jordan."

"And so," she sighed, "you've taken sides, though you know nothing about him. Surely you've lived long enough in the West to know every stranger is wrong until he proves himself right. From all you've told me Slick Jordan hasn't proven anything except that he's rash and fearless . . . and perhaps a trouble maker. You get out of it while you can."

"But I—I can't, not now. I'm in it to the teeth. 'Sides, the roundup's gotta keep goin'."

She made a scornful sound. "You're not thinking of the roundup."

"Yuh don't think," he protested, "I shuda stayed away an' let Slick be murdered?"

"Tully would never have gone that far; he wouldn't dare."

"Yuh dunno Slick Jordan. Slick wudn' let nobody ride herd on him, so thar was shure to be shootin'. . . . An' I don' think Slick 'ud waste many bullets."

They ate in silence for a time. Then she said: "I know I'm wasting my breath. You're taking on your shoulders the responsibility of protecting these utter strangers."

He laughed uncomfortably. "Bes' not let Slick hear yuh say that. He do' need no pertection. He wudn' take none. . . . But same time I'm goin' to see he gits a fair show."

"I see . . . and some day they'll carry you in with a bullet in your heart—or a noose around your neck. Sometimes I wonder which it is to be. I wonder whether I married a rancher, a Mountie, or—or a kid looking for excitement."

He appeared to consider it gravely. "Wal, yuh know I don' do much o' the ranchin'. Yuh do' need me, not with Tex. Yuh're a durn sight better rancher 'n I'll ever be." He grinned and glanced at her shyly. "Jes' the same I wudn' trade places 'th any o' them, not even 'th them ranchers wot got the big houses on the esplanade in the Hat. They ain't got you fer a wife."

Her eyes widened, and a soft smile crept into her face. "Why, I declare, Pete! You're—you're learning what a woman likes to hear, I do believe. If I've done that I've accomplished something really big."

His eyes dropped away and he shifted in the chair. "I ain't larnin' nothin' I didn' know all the time, nothin' I didn' feel, anyways." He rose abruptly and went to pick up his riding-boots. "Wal, I'll be packin' my freight. Reckon I'm needed back at the roundup."

"You think so," she murmured, too low for him to hear.

"You think so," she repeated to herself, as she watched him ride off up the ranch trail.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE NIGHT

WING, THE 3-Bar-Y Chinese cook, was up early. He was always up early, but earlier on a roundup. It was one reason why he was paid thirty a month more than the punchers. Wing was worth it. Not only was he a good cook, but he was also an indefatigable worker and a faithful member of the 3-Bar-Y outfit. The 3-Bar-Y and Mira had long been his idols, and of late Blue Pete had been steadily climbing in his estimation to stand by his wife's side.

Part of his value arose from the fact that he would stand no fooling, and the punchers were not slow to learn it. Whether at the bunkhouse or about the chuck-wagon at a roundup his discipline was unrelenting.

Always he was up and about first in the morning. He had to be to have breakfast ready for the early morning start—that is, the breakfast he prepared. For breakfast at the 3-Bar-Y—as at most other ranches—was no mere snatch of toast and coffee but a real man's meal. There was meat (sometimes even bacon), biscuits and syrup (or perhaps canned fruit), and coffee. Coffee, of course, was always on the fire, for it was drunk by the gallon during every interval of the roundup work.

As a rule Texas, even as roundup captain, slept until Wing called him, but the roundup this time had done something that interfered with his rest, so that sometimes he lay awake for hours after crawling to his reserved space beneath the chuck-wagon and rolling in his bed-roll and tarpaulin. So that often he was aware of Wing's first movement about the stove. Scattered around the chuck-wagon, the punchers not on night duty lay sleeping, rolled in their tarps. Nothing but the call to breakfast would waken them.

Wing's first task was to light the fire, or to stir it to a living flame if the cowboys when leaving night duty had kept it alight through the night. Night-herds coming in after relief always had coffee before retiring. The fire started, the old man in charge of the remuda was jostled awake, and silently he set off to find the bronchos. They must be ready for the cowboys when they had eaten.

Texas lay watching it all, yet scarcely seeing it. He wondered why he was so wide awake, why a definite uneasiness made him wakeful. He could not forget the affair in the Hills, but he would not permit himself to think that anything serious would come of it. At the worst there was always Sergeant Mahon.

Somehow, however, that did not satisfy him, and he lay watching Wing baking his biscuits.

There was, to be sure, only one recipe for biscuits, but somehow Wing made a new delicacy of them. He staked his reputation on them, and so far they had never let him down. Texas saw him fill a bread pan half-full of flour and add a little soda and salt. Then from a large crock of sourdough he extracted a lump and dropped it in the middle of the flour and proceeded to knead it.

Even the sourdough was common to every ranch. It was nothing more than a mixture of flour and water, a quart of water to a pint of flour, thoroughly stirred before setting beside the fire to sour. Simple, yet no two cooks produced the same dough. Somehow Wing's appeared to be more active and powerful and co-operative, for his biscuits would rise to four inches and more.

If they didn't— Somehow during the roundup they hadn't been rising with their customary zeal, and Wing was short-tempered and irritable.

Texas's eyes focused on him, and he smiled at the furious look that came into the yellow face. Only for a moment, then his worries swept over him once more.

The responsibilities of a roundup captain are always heavy. One of the boys at any other time of the year, in his official capacity during the most important of the year's operations it is difficult for a few days to assume his new character and

to have it recognized. With Texas it was not as difficult as with others, since he was more frequently selected, and usually he dropped into it with little mental disturbance.

But this time things were different. Everyone felt it, including Texas himself. To the difficulties of the dry season were now added the feud in the T-Inverted R outfit. A feud between two outfits was something that required handling, but they could always be located far apart on the ranges. But when the antagonism existed within an outfit it was another matter. Slick and his friends had introduced a new problem.

Added to the difficulty was the fact that Slick and his friends were not tenderfeet in any sense of the word. Indeed, some of the resentment they aroused might be traced to their accomplishments, even in arts peculiar to the cowboy. And the worst of it was that Slick was the sort of chap who would deliberately aggravate a condition he considered unjustified in the first place. He did nothing to justify unfriendliness, and when it faced him he treated it contemptuously, defied it, ridiculed it.

Yes, that was the trouble—Slick himself. He should be more reasonable, less defiant, more—humble.

Texas had almost convinced himself of that when he was brought back to the life about him by Wing's face appearing beneath the wagon.

"No sleep velly well," he said. It was not a question but a statement of fact, and Texas knew the Chinese had known it all the time.

Texas rolled into the open and stretched. "I believe you're right, Wing."

"Sleep velly bad evely night here." Wing shook his head gloomily. "Tlouble—you see it coming. Wing see it. Not like othe' loundups."

Texas was surprised, but he had no thought of discussing it with anyone as yet, least of all with Wing. "Oh, a bit of trouble, yes, but not enough to lose sleep over. Reckon it must be your cooking, Wing."

At any other time Wing would have bristled at the charge, even when made in fun, but now he only shook his head unhappily. "New punche's make tlouble. Always do."

"It's the way with the West, I suppose," said Texas. "But the T-Inverted R needed help."

"Tlouble coming, mo' tlouble."

Texas smiled mirthlessly. "Perhaps not. Things will settle down." It always surprised Texas how Wing acquired so much information of events on the range.

"Tully Mason make tlouble. New punche's—like that." He crossed the first fingers of his hands.

"Think so, Wing? Oh, well, the roundup'll soon be over. They're goin' then."

"Lots of tlouble in fo'-five days. You watch out." And Wing scurried away to the stove and rattled a pan viciously.

Suddenly he straightened and stared out over the prairie. Texas, too, had heard. Two cowboys were riding swiftly towards the camp. Texas recognized them presently as members of the Double X outfit, and a presentiment of fresh trouble made him more uneasy. Involuntarily he glanced about, with some thought of Sergeant Mahon.

The cowboys drew up before him, but for a few moments were silent.

Texas could see, however, that they had much to say, and he frowned at them. One of them turned to look away towards the other camps strung along the lakeshore, as if searching for inspiration.

The captain said sharply: "Well, what's all the trouble? What's the matter with yu both?"

A cowboy wiped his hand across his lips and looked at his companion. "We—don' know—jus' what it is."

"What are yu talkin' about?" Texas demanded angrily.

"The cows was damn uneasy last night. We had a hard time with 'em."

"That's nothin' new. We've had a hard time with them ever since the roundup started. Are yu trying to tell me anything happened? Did anything disturb them—anything yu saw or heard?"

"Damn' near a stampede," declared the second cowboy.

"Was it wolves—or what?"

The lips of the cowboys curled contemptuously. "Yu know

damn' well wolves wouldn' come out o' the Hills now, not in a roundup."

His worries and loss of sleep made Texas short-tempered. "For heaven's sake," he exploded, "what are yu tryin' to tell me?"

A cowboy pointed to his companion. "Jim here, he thought he seen somethin' th' other side the herd. It was skeerin' the cows—maybe tryin' to drive some of 'em off."

"Had yu a beef bunch?"

"Yes, the best we got so far."

Texas considered. "I suppose yu hadn't time—or maybe it was too dark when yu left—to see if any cows was missin' this mornin'. Have yu any other reason for thinkin' somethin' happened?"

"Jim thinks it was somebody."

None knew better than Texas the proneness of the cowboy for some form of panic where the cows are concerned, especially if the cause of threatened trouble is not visible, but there was always during a roundup the possibility of rustlers taking advantage of the selected herds to steal. Cowboys were not so much affected by single events as by a succession of them, an atmosphere, a feeling. And the roundup was crammed with these already.

As Texas debated how to treat what he had heard, someone rode up behind him and he turned. He was relieved to see that it was Blue Pete.

"You heard what they said, Pete?"

"Shure."

Texas went nearer and whispered: "Think there's anythin' to it?"

"Mebbe. . . . An' here's more o' the same."

Another rider was coming towards them, this time from the south, and they recognized the steel-dust broncho. Slick passed the other chuck-wagons strung along the lakeshore, paying them no attention. Forty yards away he stopped, waiting for the two cowboys to finish what they had to say. Plainly he wished to speak to Texas alone.

The captain dismissed the pair before him. "All right, boys. I'll pass on word to the other night-herds, so they'll

keep their eyes open tonight. We have a lot of beef cows in hand; we can't afford a stampede." A stampede would not only delay the roundup but would run weight off the cattle.

The pair rode away.

Slick came on. Texas scarcely noticed him at first, for he was worried. If the night-herds got it into their heads that strange things were happening in the dark it would put everyone more on edge, and that meant more trouble, the kind that could not be handled by the captain.

Slick nodded after the departing pair. It was plain that he, too, was worried. "I wonder," he said, "if they've been reporting what I've come to talk about."

Texas sighed. "What have you got to say?"

Slick bridled a little at the tone. "Too bad I didn't get here first. I've never run cows up here before, but anywhere else I'd have been suspicious about things last night."

"Go on."

"Do you have the sort of cows up here that are afraid in the dark when they should be resting? I'm not accustomed to that where I've done my punching. Perhaps your cows have a different nervous system——"

Texas threw out his hands angrily. "For God's sake, cut the gabble. Did you see or hear somethin' that made the cows restless, like them other two did?"

"It wasn't I," Slick replied. "I wasn't on herd last night. It was Dave and Buzz. They insist there was something or someone poking about the cows."

"If you haven't anythin' more definite than that——"

"But I have. The boys insist that one or two of the cows are missing this morning."

"Are they sure? Were they beef cows?"

"Of course they can't be sure. We had rounded up a pretty big bunch just before dark. They had trouble with them much of the night. Besides, they can size up a bunch pretty accurately." He looked away after the departing cowboys. "So they had trouble, too, eh?"

Texas did not reply. He turned to Blue Pete. "What about it, Pete?"

The half-breed's eyes had been fixed on Slick's face as he made his report. At Texas's question he started. "Slick's boys know thur job," he said.

"Where are the cows now—the ones your boys held last night?" Texas asked.

"They're working over towards Tully's part, to be driven in to the main herd, I suppose."

"Yu say yu weren't out las' night."

"I'm not supposed to be on at any time, but it takes the four of us to hold up our end in pairs. . . . I'm keeping away from Tully as much as I can or one of us is apt to get hurt." He made a grinning grimace. "The worst of it is that the one who isn't hurt is going to be in trouble with the Mounties. That seems to be the rule in Canada. It doesn't pay to protect oneself."

Texas appeared not to hear. His eyes were on the ground, and he kicked into the dead grass for a time thoughtfully. Suddenly he lifted his face and looked straight into Slick's eyes.

"You know this game, Slick Jordan. I think I can count on your help. We need everyone. . . . There must be something in what yu've all reported, but I don't want to frighten the boys. We're in trouble enough. You know what a stampede would do to us now."

The change in manner and tone had so plainly surprised and disconcerted Slick that for a moment or two he could only stare. Then he smiled. "All right. I'm helping. But I must have another broncho or two—and good ones. I'm not going to use Smarty in a stampede—certainly not when I'm not taking any pay for what I'm doing. I'll see that our end of things is carried through, but I won't take money from anyone who employs a foreman like Tully Mason."

CHAPTER XIV

COUNTER-CHARGES

TEXAS watched him ride away, and the lines of worry formed more deeply on his forehead. With a sigh he turned to Blue Pete. "I don't know what to make of it all, Pete."

"Wochu mean—wot happened las' night er Slick Jordan?"

"Now yu mention it—both. But just now it's last night. Do yu think there was anythin' around last night?"

"The cows allus know," said the half-breed, "an' the boys know they know."

"More trouble, always more trouble!" Texas threw out his hands in a helpless gesture. "If I mention it to the boys they'll be so touchy in the dark they'll imagine anything. I wish someone else had my job this time. . . . Just the same we gotta take precautions. There's nothin' to do but pass the word along to be on the look-out." He started away but turned back. "What about that Slick Jordan? I don't understand him. This is no place for him. . . . He knows it, too, 'cause he won't sign on with the T-Inverted R. It's all poppy-cock about not signing on 'cause of Tully. . . . And yet—and yet he's willing to work even harder than his boys. He doesn't look like a floater, either . . . and somehow I don't believe he is."

Blue Pete smiled and shook his head. "Wotever else he is he isn't no floater. Thar's suthin' 'bout him—— I dunno."

Texas's eyes riveted on him with a sudden keenness. "By the way, where were you las' night?"

"I slep' in the Hills—this side the lake. I ain't pokin' 'bout much t'other side, 'cause I reckon Slick wants to be left alone. Tha're further south."

"Yu know where they have their camp?"

"I know whar they *had* it. Slick ain't takin' no chances."

"How much do yu know about what happened the other night?"

"Wot happened—when?" asked Blue Pete innocently.

"Yu musta heard about Tully and some o' the boys goin' up into the Hills to surprise Slick Jordan."

"Shure, I heerd suthin'. Nobody hurt, was thar?"

Texas regarded him intently for a time in silence. "There mighta been. . . . I'd feel a lot easier if I knew yu was ridin' about at night."

But Blue Pete would promise nothing, and he shook his head vigorously. "I'm not buttin' in 'less I gotta." He saw the worry in the other's eyes and added: "But I'm watchin' things, Tex."

The captain had to be content with that, and he wakened suddenly to his morning duties. He could see that the other camps were awake and ready for orders, though it was not yet five o'clock, and he called for his broncho and rode away to the meeting-place to give the day's instructions.

Blue Pete commenced to follow but changed his mind and rode off to the west. He did not go far, however, in that direction but, concealed in a long coulee, turned towards the south. He wanted to get back into the Hills unobserved. From the height there, and concealed by the shadows of the forest, he could see for miles out over the prairie. He had not gone far when Sergeant Mahon suddenly appeared on a height to the east and rode down to him.

The sergeant had spent the night at the Mounted Police hut at Eagle Butte. He had not slept well, for he, too, was conscious of impending trouble, and he had little idea from which direction it would come. He always made it a point to be on hand for the day's instructions, but this morning he had been up and about for two hours before that, restless and worried, and none too good-tempered after less than four hours of sleep.

He swung in beside the pinto in a moody silence. After a time he asked: "What's going on in the roundup, Pete? You're closer to it than anyone else."

The half-breed made no attempt to evade the question. "I dunno. 'Tain't so much wot's happened as wot's goin' to. So far nobody's bin hurt—not bad. I dunno." He heaved a heavy

sigh. "Jes' now some o' the boys come in to Tex an' told him thar was suthin' out about the cows las' night, skeerin' 'em."

The sergeant regarded him anxiously. "Anything definite? Did they see or hear anything they could describe?"

Blue Pete shook his head. "That's the wust of it. They didn' see ner hear nothin' they cud talk 'bout, but they knew thar was suthin'. . . . Anyways, the cows allus know."

"I wonder—I wonder if it isn't just a—a feeling. You know how it is with the cowboys—it doesn't take much to start them imagining. You remember what the Dunlop case did to them." The Dunlop couple had been murdered, and for a time it put the entire district on edge.

It did not satisfy the half-breed. "No, it's more'n that. . . . I mighta thought it was jes' nerves, but—but Slick Jordan come in to say the same, an' he ain't got no nerves. 'Least it wasn' Slick himself seen the things; it was a coupla his boys. Slick come to tell Tex. Two o' the Double X boys come fust."

The sergeant looked about. "You're on your way now down to where Slick is?"

"Reckon he's down this way, but I wasn' lookin' fer him. I was gittin' back into the Hills fer a rest."

The sergeant glanced at him from the corner of his eyes. "So you were out during the night, eh?"

"Shure. Somebody's gotta look out."

"You didn't see or hear anything yourself?"

Blue Pete shook his head. "I'm on'y in one place at a time, Sergeant. Reckon I picked the wrong 'un las' night."

They had reached the end of the coulee and had ridden to higher ground. Mahon looked off towards the south-west. "That must be the T-Inverted R boys over there. . . . By the way, did they report anything?"

"Not when I was thar." Blue Pete turned the pinto towards the Hills. "I'm gittin' up fer a rest. I ain' got much use fer that Tully Mason. Sorta riles me. Kinda feel the hair stickin' up on my neck when he gits talkin'."

The sergeant pulled Jupiter in. "Perhaps we'd better not be seen together too much. I'll ride over and talk to Tully. Then perhaps I'll have a talk with Slick."

They parted. The sergeant rode to where Tully and three of his men held a large herd. The foreman greeted him grumpily. The affair in the Hills still clung to him, making him short-tempered and self-conscious. The very presence of a Mounted Policeman added to his uneasiness, for he knew little ever happened that did not in some form reach their ears. Even though no one had been hurt, what he had thought to do on that occasion brought him well within the law.

Mahon pretended not to notice the foreman's manner. "Well," he inquired cheerfully, "how's the roundup going in your section, Tully?"

The foreman scowled. "Damn' slow. We got the damndest lot o' scalawags on our hands all the time. They're hangin' around near the Hills. They got water there, an' when they want shade they can get it. When we git after 'em they make for the Hills."

The sergeant nodded understandingly. "It must be a lot more difficult for Slick Jordan and his boys over there," he said, turning towards the dark forest that crowned the distant heights. "And he has only——"

Vicious oaths tumbling from Tully's lips stopped him. "He's tryin' to git outa it by shuntin' the scalawags over to us. We gotta always be on the watch for 'em. He don't want the trouble o' them so he throws 'em over here. We got the work to do on 'em. That damn' Yank he couldn't do anythin' without dirt."

Mahon paid no attention. "Well, the roundup should be well under way now; it shouldn't last much longer, should it?"

"It shouldn't . . . but it will. Tex ain't goin' about things right. He ain't got the boys placed right, an' he don't know what to tell us to do—not right, I mean, not the quickest way to git the thing over. He has us in too many bunches."

"But that should hasten things, I would think."

"Not with this year's cows. They're too damn' wild to be held by anythin' but a big lot o' punchers. We can't keep 'em held. They're always tryin' to git away, an' it takes a coupla riders to git 'em back, an' by that time the others are restless. It makes the work twice as hard—and slower. . . . It wouldn't be half as hard if that Yank held his own scalawags."

There was something in the foreman's complaints, for the herd was plainly restless and difficult to control. But if there was any truth in Tully's charge against Slick Jordan the sergeant had as yet no way of proving it.

He chose not to continue the subject and a few minutes later rode away. He directed Jupiter well to the south, thinking to escape any other herds that might be held nearer the Hills.

While he was still within hearing Tully had something more to say. "Yu can tell Jordan that we don't want any more of his funny work, an' we won't stand for it. We ain't takin' no more dirt from him."

Mahon waved to show that he had heard, but he continued his way with no other reply. He dropped into a coulee and slanted up the other side. From the top the way was open right to the Hills, except for a single coulee about a half-mile away. From the coulee came sounds of cattle and of men's voices, and he turned towards it.

As he did so, Blue Pete appeared over a rise some distance to the south. Mahon watched him. He saw him reach a point where he could look down into the coulee, and there for a few moments he stopped. Then he sent the pinto forward with a quick twist of the reins and disappeared. Mahon hurried in the same direction.

When he could look down into the coulee he saw Blue Pete riding slowly about the herd. And again it was plain that there had been two herds that were now being joined. For a moment he wondered, then he decided that perhaps Slick had found it easier for only two riders to keep a herd each, keeping to himself the more difficult cows to drive.

As he descended the slope Slick saw him and came to meet him. The cowboy appeared to be amused at something, for his face wore a broad grin. As he neared Mahon he turned and pointed to the cattle, now merged into one herd and held by one of his men and the half-breed.

"I suppose it isn't quite orthodox, Sergeant," Slick said with a laugh, "but I've always had a theory that cattle are pretty much like men—you have more peace keeping the bad ones to themselves. Badness is so infectious. That's why I

decided to keep the 3-Bar-Y separate again from the T-Inverted R. It's plain that Blue Pete and Tully Mason have no great love for each other, so it's quite possible the feeling is shared by their cows. You see, I haven't enough help to prevent a fight. . . . Besides, I like the half-breed; it inclines me to be partial to his cows."

The whole idea appeared to amuse him, so that the sergeant could not be certain how serious he was. Slick watched him narrowly, and when the sergeant did not so much as smile he continued: "Sounds nutty, doesn't it? Well, it so happens that one bunch contained all the scalawags, and someone always has to keep on their tails. Funny thing, if you examine them you'll see they're mostly T-Inverted R's. There it is again—they take after Tully Mason."

Something about it puzzled Mahon. "Nothing," he said, "matters so long as you get those big fellows to the beef herd. You've got a mighty nice bunch there, I see."

Slick nodded. "The big fellows seem to want to hug the edge of the Hills." He stopped and frowned. "The boys think Tully is throwing the scalawags over to us."

Mahon laughed. "That's funny. Tully says the same of you."

To his surprise Slick took no offence. "Well, I don't mind admitting that if a scalawag shows any decided preference for Tully's companionship I don't argue much with it. Like wants like, I suppose. There, for instance, like that." A great steer had broken loose and was headed at full speed towards the west. "That's the worst one we've had. Buzz can't handle it alone, so he'll have to let it go. We've had enough trouble with that brute to be willing to share it with Tully. He thinks we're turning them over to him, does he? All right, we might as well have the fame as the name. I don't see why I should work Smarty to death to stop it. Do you?"

He appeared interested in the reply the sergeant might make, but the latter only sat in stiff silence, a little uncertain what to do or say. The steer was two hundred yards away now and was going strong, roaring defiance as it charged along.

Slick watched the sergeant anxiously. "You don't like the idea, eh?"

"It certainly makes things no easier for anyone," replied the sergeant, "and there's trouble enough already. It's my responsibility to see that peace is kept. Tully will now have proof of his charge—and with me looking on." He pointed to the west. There the T-Inverted R riders were plainly visible. "They can see us as well as we can see them, and they know you're letting that steer go."

With a gesture of surrender Slick whirled Smarty about and set off at full speed after the steer. But for several hundred yards a steer can keep ahead of the fastest horse, and with the head start it had this one looked as if pursuit was a waste of time.

Involuntarily Mahon sent Jupiter after Slick, but Smarty was too fast for him and drew slowly away. Behind him Mahon heard another broncho. Looking back, he saw Blue Pete coming, bent low over the pinto.

CHAPTER XV

RISK A LIFE TO SAVE A LIFE

THE STEER had a long lead. At first it had sprinted at full speed but, finding itself not pursued, it had slowed down. But with the sound of pursuit at its back it set off again.

Less than a mile away was the herd Tully and his men held, now starting on its way to the cutting point. Tully himself had evidently been watching what was happening, for he pulled up and faced the oncoming steer.

Suddenly he dug his spurs into his mount and came tearing to head it off. Behind followed two of his men. Evidently he thought to turn the scalawag back before it reached the territory he covered. It would bring him face to face with both Slick and the sergeant, and he would be able to throw in their faces the proof of the charge he had made.

Racing towards the rushing steer, he would reach it before Slick.

While he was still fifty yards away the steer appeared to become aware of him, for it stopped, snorting furiously and pawing the ground. It was thoroughly aroused now and dangerous, a mad wild animal afraid of nothing and stopping at nothing.

Tully came recklessly on. It was not that he failed to recognize the danger or belittle it—he had lived too long among cattle for that—but always he had proven his mastery of the brutes and he had no thought of turning tail now—not with Slick before him.

The latter had released his rope. He held it in extended arm, swinging it slowly over his head. It looked now to be a race between him and Tully, and all the latter's hatred sent him rashly forward.

The steer stood, head lowered, tail stiff, bellowing low in

its throat, showering turf and dust from its pawing hoof. Cornered, its fury knew no bounds. Snorting stertorously, it appeared to be waiting for the moment to strike.

At that moment Tully was not more than thirty yards away and already swinging from a direct attack. And then—his broncho stepped into a badger hole.

So intent were horse and rider on the menace ahead that Tully had no time to save himself. Straight forward he pitched towards the steer, landing heavily on head and shoulder. And there he lay, twitching and half unconscious.

It was the victim for which the steer waited, and half a ton of murderous fury and viciousness launched to the attack.

Slick was still forty yards away, his rope twirling over his head. As the steer shot ahead, Slick seemed to lean forward in the saddle, as if to push Smarty to greater speed. Fifty yards behind came the sergeant, with Blue Pete rapidly overtaking him.

Mahon had seen Tully fall, had seen the steer rush to attack. There might still be a chance for Slick and his rope, though a doubtful one, and he automatically reached for his rifle. But he knew he dare not use it, for Slick and Smarty were directly between him and the steer. Sick with anxiety, he closed his eyes for a moment.

For Slick had suddenly dropped the rope over the horn of his saddle. He was going to let the steer end his feud with Tully. The foreman could do nothing to fend off the horrible death that would reach him in twenty seconds. No one could prevent it now—and there could be no punishment for Slick. Defenceless, unable to rise, Tully lay with death rushing towards him.

A muttered oath broke from the sergeant's lips, and for a fleeting second he considered shooting Slick. But that would not save Tully; and an overwhelming feeling of having made a tragic mistake somewhere made him gasp.

He opened his eyes with a sense of tingling action.

Slick appeared to have actually lifted Smarty forward to close those few yards to the charging steer. And before it reached the semi-conscious foreman he was level with it.

He did then what might have cost him his life, yet as he watched, Mahon realized that he had seen the one chance that remained to save Tully. As he came level with the steer's head Slick threw himself from the saddle, caught the snorting nose in both hands, his own body dragging on the ground; and with a wrench he jerked the steer's horns downward so suddenly that they caught in the ground. And the brute, stopped in full flight, turned a complete somersault. It landed almost at Tully's side and before it could move Slick was astride its head.

In the next moment Blue Pete was there with his rope, and the steer could not even kick.

Slick picked himself up. He stumbled and limped a little, and a hand rubbed for a moment along his left thigh. He smiled at the sergeant—a curious smile, half apologetic, half shy, as though he knew well that he might have missed and, missing, would have been to blame. He wiped his hands together and whistled Smarty to him.

It was bull-dogging at its best. In that split second he had done the one thing that would save his enemy, for the rope, however well thrown, would surely have failed to stop the heavy brute in time. And he had done it at the risk of his own life. In addition, no bull-dogging short of catching the steer's horns in the ground would have stopped it in time. And yet Slick appeared ashamed of the whole performance, as if he had been showing off again.

Tully recovered quickly. He was not much hurt. Slowly he raised himself to a seated position, rubbing head and shoulder. He saw the trussed steer right at his side, so near that he could touch it as he sat. Blue Pete stood over it. Slick had limped away to Smarty.

Tully's lips bared. "Damn that broncho!" he snarled. "Pal 'ud 'a' seen that hole." He glanced from the steer to the half-breed. "Pretty close thing, eh? He might have hurt me."

Blue Pete turned his back in open disgust. "He'd dang sure more'n hurt yuh," he growled. "An' 'twasn' me stopped him. Slick done that. All I done was keep it from kickin' holes in yer carcass. Yuh'd 'a' bin a cooked goose ef yuh'd waited fer me. Ugh!" He spat noisily.

Tully scowled towards where Slick was climbing with some difficulty into the saddle, but he said nothing.

Then Mahon was beside him, looking him over, trying to control his own disgust. "Are you all right?" he asked.

The foreman picked himself up with a short laugh. "Sure I'm okay. I've bin piled before. A badger hole'd pile anybody with a nag like that. In another ten seconds I'd 'a' had that brute stopped."

"You nearly had him—in your guts," declared Mahon scornfully, and turned away.

Tully gave no sign that he heard. He went to where his broncho stood, unhurt but unable to run because of the dragging reins. Mounting, he rode up to the steer. Blue Pete had removed his rope, but the steer was having difficulty releasing its horns from the ground. Tully turned to Slick and pointed at the animal.

"There's yer scalawag. I seen it git away from yu, an' yu didn' do nothin' to stop it till yu saw it was too late. It mighta killed someone."

Slick only smiled. He turned the smile on the sergeant and Blue Pete and broadened it to a wide grin. Apparently he still felt a little foolish about the whole affair. He dismounted and kicked the steer to its feet. Trembling, completely subdued, it stood with braced legs.

Slick jerked a thumb to it as he remounted. "It's yours, Tully. You can have the credit of driving it in. Such a nice big, fat fellow, too. By the way, did you notice the brand? It would have hurt so much more to find what one of your own cows had done to you. Ungrateful brute, isn't it? You don't want it?" For Tully had turned his back. "Very well. You don't appear to appreciate each other, so I'll take it. I rather admire it for such depth of understanding. But in a roundup—with a Mountie looking on—one can't let these little displays of affection become too boisterous."

As if it understood, the steer ambled back the way it had come.

Tully's face had gone almost purple with fury. Too slow-witted to understand all Slick had said, he felt the barb more keenly. "It isn't the first time you've thrown 'em at us, Slick

Jordan. But don't forget the roundup isn't over yet. There's lots of time. I've been in this game too long to——"

He stopped, recoiling before the furious sergeant who spurred Jupiter up to him and leaned forward to touch him on the shoulder. "If I hear any more of that, you're coming in to the barracks with me. And don't *you* forget that the roundup isn't over yet. . . . You're a miserable, ungrateful cad, and if there's any more of your meanness I'll take you where you'll have time almost to wish Slick hadn't saved your life."

"He saved my life like blazes!" Tully exploded.

Mahon made a gesture of disgust and turned away. "I'm telling you. I'd like nothing better than to have another excuse to run you in."

He rode away to join Slick and Blue Pete who had already departed.

Slick glanced at his furious face and commenced to laugh. "Don't take it so hard, Sergeant," he said. "I can't imagine anything more embarrassing than to be thanked by Tully Mason. The whole scene ran true to form, and that made it more comfortable for everyone. I performed for the edification of an audience, and Tully recognized it as that. Think how embarrassing it would have been for him if he had had to admit that an enemy had done anything for him."

Blue Pete was muttering. "Bes' bull-doggin' I ever seen. It durn shure had to be. I ain't seen that finish more'n three times in my life. Ef yuh hadn' got them horns in the ground——"

Slick made an exaggerated bow. "Applause for a bit of showing-off," he said. "I could have roped that brute."

"The rope wudn' 'a' stopped it in time," said the half-breed.

The sergeant found his voice: "When I saw you drop the rope I thought you were going to let Tully take what was coming to him . . . and I'd have shot someone, I suppose."

Slick appeared amused at their seriousness. "Wouldn't that have been something? Then you'd have had to arrest yourself . . . and there'd have been two of us dead, Tully and I. What would the inspector say to that? I myself thought of shooting the steer, but it was too late for that. They'll run hundreds of yards with a bullet through their heart—and there was no

fatal spot to reach from behind. At the best it would have fallen on Tully and crushed him. As it was I had to turn its head at the last moment to make it fall away from him. That's what gave me the wrench in my side. The sacroiliac they call it, don't they?" He chuckled. "Fact is, I wasn't going to risk Smarty's knees against the jerk of the rope when that heavy brute launched itself against the loop; I think too much of him for that. Smarty would have had to hold the steer without giving an inch, and that's dangerous. . . . Besides, I might have missed, or the rope might have broken, or Smarty might not have had time to brace himself.

"To tell you the truth, I forgot all about Tully. There was a chance to do a bit of bull-dogging that I haven't found it necessary to do often enough to keep in practice. Last time was at a broncho-busting affair in Wyoming." He leaned forward and patted his broncho on the neck. "That was where I won Smarty."

He rode a few feet ahead of the sergeant, holding Smarty in. Mahon eyed the slim, athletic figure. One hundred and sixty pounds at the most, and he had turned a running half-ton of charging fury over on its back with little apparent effort. He had risked his own life to save the life of an enemy who would always be an enemy. A man to admire . . . and to fear . . . and to watch.

To fear and to watch? It was unfair to Slick; surely it was unfair. The sergeant frowned and tried to forget.

CHAPTER XVI

WORRIED RANCHERS

THE ROUNDUP was not going smoothly. Old-timers thought they knew the reason—or some of it. Yet they knew as well that there was something more, something they could not put into words. It was the way of roundups: sometimes they went so smoothly, often they spun out for no reason they could give. It was the way of cattle, affected by so many little things unfelt by humans. There was even much about the cowboys that interfered with the operation at times. And that, too, no one could describe.

That year there was always the Hills to blame. It was so easy, so usual, to ascribe misfortune to the proximity of the Hills, and this time there was more than usual to justify it, for the cattle had learned the comfort of the shade they found in the trees, and in the open they were wilder and more stubborn.

Slick's arduous position near the Hills brought no complaints from him. It was Tully and his men who did the complaining, though they could see at every hour of the day that the work of Slick and his friends was more difficult. Slick only laughed about it, asserting that it suited him to be near where he made his camp.

Mahon felt the strain more than events seemed to him to justify, and that night from the hut at Eagle Butte he spoke to Inspector Barker over the telephone.

He had scarcely announced himself when the inspector said, "Roundup going pretty slowly, eh?"

It did not surprise Mahon. The inspector had his finger on everything that happened in the district—but little could be said over the telephone. "It's been a difficult season," he said.

The inspector laughed knowingly. "Yes, of course." He

was silent for a moment, then: "You've had a strenuous few days out there. Better take two or three days off and come in for a rest. I'll send Jenkinson to take your place while you're here. I'll look for you tomorrow evening. Goodbye."

What Mahon did not know and wanted to know was the extent of his superior's information. Was he aware of the feud between Tully Mason and Slick Jordan, and did he know of the events marking it? Had something of the story of that night in the Hills reached him, and in what form? Everyone seemed to have heard of it, but so much was mere gossip and conjecture, flights of imagination that arose from the tight lips of those who had taken part in it. He himself had enough to form some definite conclusions, and he knew the inspector would cull out the gossip.

Early next morning he was on his way. He was in time to see the punchers receiving their morning instructions from Texas, and he waved as he passed but did not stop. From the direction he took he knew they would know his destination, and he wondered if they would take advantage of his absence. Half-way to Turner's Crossing he met Corporal Jenkinson, and they stopped for a time to talk. Jenkinson was not pleased with his new task, and he growled about it. At Turner's Crossing it was comfortable enough, and there was little to do; and he did not like riding in the hot sun.

"Why the devil can't you handle this yourself, Sergeant?" he grumbled. "I had a long game of solitaire on at the Crossing, and I was beating myself. I owe myself about a million dollars and I want to get that money back. Besides, I have a book of crossword puzzles, and they've been licking me. Now this butts in."

Mahon shrugged. "It isn't my fault. The inspector ordered me into town. I haven't any idea why. Have you?"

"Oh, I suppose you've been making the usual mess of things. So I have to go out to straighten things out."

Mahon scarcely smiled. More and more he was oppressed by the fear that the inspector had heard something that would reflect on his work, and he was none too confident himself that he had done what he should to forestall trouble. "But

do you really know what the inspector has heard?" he asked. "He seems to have a pretty good idea of what's been going on."

Jenkinson shook his head. "No-o, I don't know anything. But some of the ranchers have gone to town—they're there still, I think—and they've probably been talking. Some of them stopped the night with me. They're growling about the roundup spinning out so long. There's a train of cattle cars waiting right now at Dunmore Junction, and demurrage has to be paid on them, you know."

"It's their own fault," said Mahon. "They ordered the cars too soon. No matter how smoothly the roundup ran the cattle wouldn't have been there to load by this time."

"There's talk, too," said Jenkinson, "of trouble among the outfits. Jim Allen says Tully reports that the T-Inverted R isn't going to come out this drive as well as they thought, and you can imagine the grouch Jim has on that account."

It puzzled Mahon. "But Tully couldn't form much of an opinion so soon. The roundup is only nicely under way now."

"Then there's Ford Welch. Ford would never be satisfied, as you know. They'll be sure to carry their grouch to the inspector, sure as guns—though what we have to do with it I don't see."

Mahon grunted. "If Allen and Welch used better judgment in their choice of punchers things might be different."

Jenkinson had the last word: "Anyway keep your shirt on, Sergeant. I'll have the mess cleaned up for you by the time you return. The inspector knows whom he can trust. Toodle-oo!"

Mahon reached town by mid-afternoon. He had covered the forty miles slowly, stopping for a rest at the hut at Turner's Crossing. He entered town by way of Toronto Street and followed it through to South Railway Street, where the railway blocked the way. He seldom went that way, usually turning across to Main Street just below the cutbank, and as the Alberta Hotel came in sight he wondered why he had broken the rule.

All the ranchers stopped at the Alberta Hotel, and he saw that several were there now. They were perched on the veranda, six steps above the street, seated in a row, their riding-boots lifted to the railing. Four pairs of boots, and the sergeant wished he had taken Main Street. Over the soles he recognized Ford Welch of the Double X, Rex Middleton of the Triangle H, Jim Allen of the T-Inverted R, and Cooney Featherstone of the Double Bar-Y.

Welch waved to him and dropped his feet from the railing to lean forward and shout: "What's the matter with the roundup, Sergeant? Have you given it up?"

Mahon tried to make his smile look casual. "After meeting the roughnecks you hire, Ford, even a Mounted Policeman needs a rest. Besides, why can't we loaf a little, like the rest of you? I notice you don't hang around that outfit of yours. Why should I put up with them?"

The other ranchers laughed, and Welch reddened a little. "A roundup's not our job," he replied. "I always thought it was a concern of the Mounties."

"It is," agreed Mahon. "It would be less concern if you hired better men. There needn't be anything for us to do at a roundup, just like you, but with that bunch of yours it's a nightmare."

Welch couldn't take it. "Don't try to be funny. You know things are not going well out there."

"But it isn't the Mounted Police who do the rounding up. That's what that outfit of yours attempts to do."

"And where do the Mounties fit in? Isn't it your job to see that trouble doesn't break out? This year you've failed——"

Mahon was in no mood to be patient. He drew in nearer the veranda so that he did not have to shout, and raised himself in the stirrups to be nearer the faces looking down on him. "To what trouble do you refer, Ford? Perhaps you've heard more than I have—or less. Perhaps stories that carry forty miles accumulate a lot of bunk on the way. You've surely lived long enough in the West to know that."

"But you know, Sergeant, that things aren't going right out there. The roundup should be almost finished. I'm

told it's scarcely started." It was Jim Allen speaking this time.

"Why don't you go and help, so you don't need to be told?" Mahon countered. "I could tell you a lot of things. One is that with that foreman of yours almost anything is apt to happen."

Cooney Featherstone patted Allen encouragingly on the shoulder and chuckled. "Go to it, Jim. You can't give up now. I don't suppose it matters that the more you say the deeper you'll be floundering in a minute or two. These Mounties are a bad lot to heckle." Cooney was always teasing someone.

"Why don't you carry your grouch to the inspector?" Mahon asked. "He's the one you want."

Three of the ranchers laughed, but Allen exploded, "Damn it, I did." He turned to Featherstone and shrugged. "You're right, Cooney: no one ever gets anywhere with them."

Mahon was glad they had seen the inspector, for it removed some responsibility from his shoulders. With a laugh and a wave of his hand he passed on and turned into South Railway Street.

He did not hear the conversation that ensued on the Alberta Hotel veranda. Middleton growled and cleared his throat irritably. "It's no use just hinting at things, Jim," he said. Rex Middleton was a long, lean man with a grey goatee that waved curiously about when he was upset. "You don't know any more about it than the rest of us. All we know——"

"We know all we need know," grumbled Allen. "The roundup is going too slowly. It looks as if the snow'll be flying before we have those cows in the cars."

"Nice to think of the demurrage we'll have to pay," complained Welch.

Cooney Featherstone shook his head with exaggerated despair. "And such fine, upright, pleasant-mannered boys, those punchers of ours, especially Tully Mason."

"Tully's all right," declared Allen. "Not a better foreman in the district."

"Then it must be those new lads from the States. They tell me they're all tophands. What are you paying them, Jim?"

"By the way things are going I'm paying them far too much," was all Allen would say.

"As much as you pay the old lot? Has Tully reported against them?"

Allen grunted. "I haven't heard a good word about them."

"Hm-m! That doesn't fit into what my boys tell me."

"Nobody likes them," Ford Welch broke in. "That's what makes the trouble."

"Is that enough to upset the whole roundup?" inquired Cooney Featherstone innocently.

Middleton rubbed his long nose thoughtfully. "I've heard a lot of stories—though most of them seem to have originated with Tully. And frankly, Jim, I don't like that foreman of yours. Tully hates the new boys, and that always means trouble with a chap like him."

Featherstone commenced to chuckle. "Did anyone ever stop to think that this hatred may be only another form of envy. Those new punchers appear to be able to do things our boys can't do but would like to. Of course as an old-timer I know no newcomer has a right to possess attainments we have to admire. That's ritual in the West. . . . The worst of it is that these new boys don't seem to think they should—should hide their light under a bushel." He whistled. "Say, I surprise myself. I didn't think I could repeat the Scriptures at this late date. It's my upbringing coming out at long last. I must do a bit more reading at it so I can floor you ordinary sinners with quotations. Nobody can contradict the Scriptures."

Both Welch and Allen frowned. Accustomed to Cooney's banter as they were, they had never learned to laugh with him, except with the greatest difficulty.

"My father," snapped Allen, "was a Methodist minister back East."

"So he sent you West as the black sheep of the family, eh? Well, we won't hold your origin against you. But we were discussing the roundup. What really is happening out there—if anyone knows the first thing about it?"

Allen said: "At least we know there's a lot of bad feeling. And we know what that means on a roundup."

"And whose fault is it? Do you blame it on Texas?"

They all came to Texas's defence. "He's the best captain we could have," declared Middleton.

"It's these new hands of mine," said Allen. "And what can I do about it? I need them."

"Has Tully made any definite charges against them?" Cooney asked. "Can't they do their work? Aren't they real punchers?"

"Tully says this Slick fellow drives the scalawags over to him."

Cooney nodded thoughtfully. "Good for him—if he can get away with it. . . . I'm told Tex has had to split up your outfit. By the way, does anyone know anything about this Slick Jordan? I've an idea things must be serious out there; that's what brought the sergeant to town—to talk things over with Inspector Barker. I'll wager that's what he's here for. There's so much can happen out there near the Hills——"

"I always wonder," Welch interrupted, "what part Blue Pete is playing in the disturbance."

"Tully tells me he's out there," Allen said. "He's always about. . . . Funny thing—he never helps in a roundup, but he's always around."

"We have to thank him for that," Featherstone reminded him. "He's saved us many a steer; we all know that."

"We know, too," Allen declared, "that he was a rustler himself once, and——"

"'Once a rustler, always a rustler,'" Featherstone sighed. "That's what we've been taught to think—or it's the fashion."

"Well," persisted Allen, "I wouldn't trust him as far as I could see him."

"I wouldn't myself," agreed Cooney. "That is, if he wanted to fool us. I'm not sure he ever does. But why bring him in, Jim?"

Allen had no reply except a gloomy shaking of his head.

"Of course," said Featherstone slyly, "if we're not satisfied with the way the roundup's going we might go out and help. Has anyone ever thought of that? I'm taking the credit of

thinking of it first. It's a suggestion for the rest of you. Me? Oh, I'm far too heavy for such riding. But, of course, it's much more comfortable and befitting our dignity to sit here on the Alberta veranda and spit through our riding-boots to the sidewalk. Now and then, too, a Mountie may pass and give us a chance to grouse. I'm with you, boys."

CHAPTER XVII

A WORRIED INSPECTOR

SERGEANT MAHON rode thoughtfully along South Railway Street, turned at Main Street, and crossed the railway tracks to the corral gate behind the Mounted Police barracks.

Inspector Barker had seen him coming and as the back door closed he called to him.

Mahon went forward along the hall and entered the front office.

"Close the door." The inspector shifted recklessly about in the crazy swivel chair and faced him. He was scowling. "Sit down. You made good time. Jenkinson out there?"

"I met him, sir. He'd be at the roundup before noon."

"Good. Throw off your stetson and rest your head." He touched the untidy pile of tobacco that usually lay on his blotting pad. "You don't smoke much, do you? Too bad. I can think of lots of times when you'd find it useful."

Mahon knew something was coming. "Spots where you'd find it useful," he had said. This, it implied, was one of them—the trouble at the roundup. The sergeant seated himself, placed his hat on the desk, and waited while the inspector packed his pipe.

Suddenly the latter looked up. "You're worried, Mahon. Tell me all about it. This roundup is going wrong. I know that, but why?"

Mahon drew a long breath. He knew he would feel better for telling most of what he knew. And yet—and yet some of it he did not intend to tell. He had an idea that no one on the outside, not even the inspector, would understand. "There isn't much to tell, sir," he commenced, "not so much as there is to think and wonder about. Fact is, sir, four ranchers right here in town have almost as many facts about the roundup as

I have . . . and they do a lot more guessing. I came down Toronto Street, and Featherstone and Welch and Allen and Middleton are there on the Alberta veranda. Ford Welch and Allen had a lot to say."

The inspector grunted. "Huh! They've had a lot to say to me. So if you know what they're talking about, what have you to say?"

"I can add little. They're right about the roundup not going well . . . right in part, at least. I haven't the complete story myself, but I think I have enough of it to piece together something fairly complete. They know it's spinning out unduly, but that in itself is not our concern."

The inspector puffed for a few silent moments. "But something about it is our concern, that's what you mean. There's trouble . . . and more is threatening. That's where we come in."

"Yes, sir. The difficulty is to know when and where we should interfere."

"But you know who is making the trouble—or threatening it?"

"I think I do, sir . . . and yet . . . the one it centres about may not be to blame."

Inspector Barker nodded as if he understood. "Then you know who's in it, at least—whether they start it or not."

"Tully Mason is the worst . . . and there's Slick Jordan, the new puncher with the T-Inverted R. He and Tully are at loggerheads."

The inspector nodded again. "That doesn't surprise me—neither of them. Mason is a trouble-maker, always has been, and that Jordan isn't one to run from trouble. He'd be inclined to run to meet it, if I'm a judge of men. But let that rest for a moment. Welch tells me something more—that the beef isn't turning out as satisfactory as they counted on. He says several of the ranchers are surprised. I couldn't corner him into saying whether he thought it careless driving, or if he thought someone was doing a bit of rustling on the side. At any rate he had a real peeve and he brought it to me." He settled back in the chair. "Now tell me about Mason and Jordan."

Mahon hesitated. He scarcely knew how much was worth reporting, scarcely knew how much of what he might tell might be coloured by his own prejudices and imagination, or by the stories he had heard. He even doubted that the inspector was in a position to estimate values of what he had to tell. It was a long time since the inspector had exposed himself to the trying days of a roundup—the heat, the long hours, the choking dust, the strong winds that sometimes blew, the stubbornness of the cows at times, and the petty irritations that arose among the punchers. Allowance had to be made for all these, and he himself had been in the thick of it so long that he could make that allowance. But could the inspector?

The latter noticed the hesitation. "I'd know that new cowboy would be in it. He's that sort of chap. . . . I think I understand your remark that the one around whom the trouble centres may not be responsible for it. He doesn't perhaps chase around looking for trouble, but he might welcome it, certainly he wouldn't duck it. And if Tully Mason gets near him—but of course he must, since they're in the same outfit."

"Tully certainly had his knife out for him, sir."

The inspector regarded him intently. "Is it as serious as that? Hm-m! And you seem to be taking Slick's side."

"As between the two of them, sir, there isn't much else I could do—even though I understand how Tully and some of the others must feel towards a newcomer with such self-assurance as Jordan has. Indeed, Tully's hatred was so evident from the very start that Slick and his friends make their own camp in the Hills; they merely eat now and then at the T-Inverted R chuck-wagon."

Inspector Barker frowned and shook his head. "That's a mess."

"But Slick and his boys are always on hand to do their work."

"That Slick! That Slick!" The inspector stared through the window. "I knew something would happen around him. He's had me wondering . . . I'm still wondering."

"So am I, sir. And then—and then along comes something that puzzles me even more: in spite of all that bad feeling Tully Mason owes his very life to Slick, and it came at the

very moment when they were ready to shoot, almost." He told the story of the scalawag Slick had bull-dogged.

It interested the inspector. "That's bull-dogging at its best. I've known only one other man who could do that—Blue Pete. But Pete weighs twenty or thirty pounds more than Slick, and when it comes to twisting a steer's neck so it will fall exactly where one wants it, weight as well as muscle and skill counts. The shock to a light fellow like Slick must have been tremendous."

"It was. He limps a little since. But he won't speak of it."

"What did Tully say about it?"

Mahon's eyes flashed angrily. "What would you expect Tully to say, sir? He refused even to admit that anything had been done for him."

"And Slick?"

"Slick just laughed. I really think he was glad Tully didn't attempt to thank him. Indeed, he tried to make it appear that he had bull-dogged the steer to show off, or to save Smarty, his broncho, from the strain of the rope."

The inspector laughed quietly. "Queer fellow, isn't he? I don't know what to make of him. . . . He could have let Tully be killed, and there wasn't a thing we could have done about it."

"That just doesn't happen to be the sort of chap Slick is, sir," said the sergeant. When the inspector smiled, he added: "Yes, I like him; I can't help it. But——"

Inspector Barker nodded. "Yes, there's that 'but.' And it's that 'but' we can't afford to ignore."

"There's no doubt, sir, he has a lot of inherent decency that Tully wouldn't appreciate, but apart from that I won't vouch for him. All I know is he's a real puncher, with more education than one finds along his kind, and with somewhat different ideas of things. Even Blue Pete seems to like him."

"Hm-m! Yes . . . Blue Pete. He's around out there, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir, and more in evidence than ever. I imagine he's no more satisfied with the way things are going than I am."

"Has he said so?"

"He doesn't need to. I can feel it."

The inspector eyed him questioningly. "You don't think—you don't think—there might be something between them?"

"Blue Pete and—and Slick? Of course not. At least," hurriedly, "I've seen no evidence of it. Why should there be?"

"Hm-m! Could it be that there's something going on that they're both in? They may have known each other across the Border and—and be working something together."

Mahon stiffened. "If you mean rustling, sir, I surely don't think they're working that together."

"Take it easy, boy, take it easy." The inspector touched his arm apologetically. "I make no charges. But we must consider every possibility. Welch seemed to think some of his cows are missing . . . and we know nothing about Slick Jordan."

"I know, sir, that he's doing the work of three punchers, and without any pay himself. Only his three friends, you know, are being paid by Jim Allen."

"That makes it more baffling still. I know you'd defend Blue Pete against any suggestion of a charge, but you must admit that where there's trouble he's mighty near it."

"And where we want the trouble stopped, sir, we can depend on him."

The inspector chuckled teasingly. "But we mustn't forget his former life."

"I'll say, sir, on my reputation, that Blue Pete has nothing to do with Slick Jordan in the way you mean. He's more concerned about the trouble at the roundup than anyone but myself. I saw him pulling Tully Mason up short when it looked like shooting. There's nothing between him and Slick except that Blue Pete admires a good puncher—and Slick certainly has his good points. There was an incident in the Hills on the second night of the roundup. I haven't all the facts—I don't know that anyone has—but something happened."

He told all he knew about it, but his story did not include the half-breed, though he had a strange feeling that his friend was somehow mixed up in it. In whatever light he considered the affair Blue Pete always intruded.

Perhaps not so strangely the inspector, too, as he listened, thought of Blue Pete, and he spoke of it. "Somehow it sounds

exactly the sort of situation Blue Pete couldn't keep out of. Have you mentioned it to him?"

"No, sir. I don't see any reason to embarrass him. He wouldn't lie about it, not to me, but if he doesn't speak of it he doesn't wish to discuss it. If he was in it and won't speak, I can't see that we need concern ourselves about him, sir. No one was hurt, and no damage was done. . . . The only curious thing is that Tully Mason's favourite broncho, Pal, disappeared that night and hasn't turned up since."

The inspector considered. "That in itself might justify interfering. If Tully's broncho is missing——"

"But he hasn't appealed to us, sir, about it."

"I can't imagine him working on roundup without Pal. It means something has happened that Tully doesn't wish to discuss with us. I'm not going to order you to do anything about it, Mahon, but I've a feeling that Pal does interest us. If you find him it may tell us more of the story, and I'm curious. Anyway, keep your eyes open. Don't neglect the Hills. Don't neglect Slick Jordan—and Blue Pete."

He sat for a time staring thoughtfully through the window, the fingers of one hand drumming on the desk. Presently he said: "So we really have nothing to go on concerning things out there except that there's bad feeling between two of the punchers. But that brings matters definitely within our field, and it's up to you to handle it. The beef isn't our concern, unless we can trace rustling." His head shook again and again. "I can't help wondering about Slick Jordan."

"Four of them, sir, are on duty in shifts twenty-four hours of the day."

"Yes, yes. It wouldn't leave them much time for anything else, would it? At any rate keep an eye on them. You like Slick, yet you don't trust him. Some of the nicest chaps I ever knew I never let behind me. Take a rest until tomorrow, at least, then get out there again. Send Jenkinson back to Turner's Crossing. I may want to get in touch with him."

CHAPTER XVIII

A WORRIED CAPTAIN

BACK AROUND the Cypress Hills the pot was boiling more fiercely than Sergeant Mahon knew. Almost the moment his back was turned it commenced to boil over. His ability, his watchfulness, his popularity, always acted as a controlling influence over lawless spirits and quick tempers. The cowboys had spent their lives where the bonds of the law were seldom within sight, and where its minor breaches were viewed with a certain amount of tolerance. The worst of it was—and none knew it better than the Mounted Police—that without periodic and sometimes ruthless restraint these minor breaches were apt to grow into more serious crimes peculiar to the West.

It accounted for the fact that Mahon's departure under such delicate conditions left the roundup with barriers down. The cat was away—and at the best Corporal Jenkinson was not Sergeant Mahon.

Simmons was the first to recognize it. Of more experience than Jenkinson, and after many years working with the sergeant, he felt the difference immediately.

Blue Pete, too, was conscious of it, but he had foreseen the danger should the sergeant be called away. And so he was prepared to take special steps to forestall trouble. It entailed almost ceaseless riding, with so little rest that at times he slept in the saddle. The first night after Mahon left the half-breed did not think of sleep. Hour after hour he rode over the prairie, keeping near enough to be aware of how well the night-herds were performing their duties but far enough away to escape being seen or to disturb the cattle. For other hours he lay where he could keep the end of the Hills under his eyes by day, by night within hearing. For he knew it was there that trouble was sure to occur. He even considered suggesting to Texas

that Tully and Slick should be further separated. It was, however, the rule that a rancher should not interfere with the operation of a roundup, and he held back. He was doubtful, too, of the wisdom of so openly recognizing the feud. It would only bring it more into the open, and both men had too little self-restraint to make that safe.

Texas had not been blind. At frequent intervals he rode to where Slick and his friends were at work, but when he saw that it aroused comment he desisted.

Slick himself remarked on it, a laugh on his handsome face: "Oh, sure, I know we set an example for the others, but it won't do us any good for the captain to be so frank about it. Tully will be sure to resent it. . . . Or perhaps you're afraid we'll get into trouble. Don't worry, Tex, we can look after ourselves."

"What sort of trouble do you mean?" Texas asked.

Slick shrugged. "It isn't only from Tully. We're not white-haired laddies to many more than Tully Mason. He's worked the ground well against us. But we're on guard, so don't worry."

But Texas did worry, and he could not hide it. "Suppose I moved you farther away."

Slick's eyes widened with surprise and something like consternation. "You wouldn't do that—not if you're the captain I think you are. We're used to this part, and we like it. Besides, we have our camp in the Hills. We can't stay with the chuck-wagon. No, no, Texas, leave us here. I think we can manage to keep out of trouble."

"I don't see why you like this sort of thing," Texas puzzled. "Only three of you are getting paid."

"We won't be here for ever," said Slick, "you can depend on that. In the meantime we're having a good time—even though I'm heart-broken that Tully should consider me a show-off, a smart-aleck." He patted Smarty's neck. "One can't help showing off with a broncho like this. If we're enjoying ourselves it doesn't matter about the pay. We were hired—or three of us were—and we're sticking to the job to the end. Tully Mason isn't going to have the satisfaction of thinking we were afraid to work next him. Leave us alone, Tex, leave us alone."

There was nothing else to do, and in desperation Texas rode away to have a talk with the other half of the feud.

Tully had seen him talking to Slick and his greeting was a snarl: "Well, what's Jordan got to say now? Want to move?"

"He certainly doesn't. And he's not what you think. He's one of the best punchers you or I've ever seen—better than most of us."

"He's a smart-aleck. What's he doin' up here, anyway?"

Texas found it difficult to control his anger, and he turned away. In the distance he could see Slick and Smarty outlined against the yellow grass of the slope to the Hills. "What he's been doin' ever since the roundup started is more than his share of the work. They're punchers, them boys. If every-one else did as much work we'd be farther along."

Tully sidled his broncho nearer. "Mean to say we ain't doin' our share?"

Texas's teeth clamped together, but he managed to say in a quiet voice: "Better stop yer dust-pawin', Tully. It doesn't go with me." He turned to look over the two herds Tully's men had under control. "What's the idea?"

Tully indicated the smaller herd. "Them's scalawags. We have to keep 'em close-herded."

Texas rode nearer and looked the cattle over. "They don't look like scalawags. They're mighty good beef. Don't let 'em do much runnin'."

"I'm a puncher—and a foreman," snapped Tully. "I know what I otta do. I'll tell you what they are: they're scalawags Slick Jordan threw over at us las' night."

"Is that so? And what were your boys doin' to let it happen?"

Tully looked uncomfortable. "Wel-l, they have to ride the other side, don't they? They didn' see Slick do it . . . we found 'em in a coulee where Slick left 'em. Over that way."

Texas's smile was a sneer. "Well, they're mighty good beef. Run 'em in right away."

In the course of his wanderings Blue Pete, too, visited Slick and his friends as often as twice a day, and it was difficult to make the visit appear casual. Usually only two cowboys were

on duty, the other two resting for the other trick, but Slick seldom was absent. Choosing the day when the work was hardest, there were times when he was absent, but always he turned up. Blue Pete he greeted with a smile, and after the third visit the smile was suggestively broad.

"Between you and Texas," he laughed, "we're not apt to get lonesome. You can tell him we need no help—of any kind. . . . We don't even need inspection. Even the cows appear to like us. Perhaps they know their friends when they see them—yes, even the scalawags."

Blue Pete appeared not to hear; he was eyeing Smarty. "You'll be killin' him ef yuh use him so hard," he advised. "Yuh never ride anythin' else."

"Because I won't ride the jug-heads Tully gives us. Anyway, Smarty can stand it. I'm not likely to ask him to do more than he can without injury. Our area isn't large, and I let the boys do most of the rough work with the ranch horses. I won't give Tully the satisfaction of getting me into trouble with one of his nags." He studied the half-breed's face through half-closed eyes. "Besides, I feel safer with Smarty between my knees—under my eyes." He chuckled. "I can imagine how Tully must feel without that broncho of his. Pal hasn't turned up yet, has he?"

"I was goin' to ast *you* that," said Blue Pete.

"Me? How should I know?"

And for some reason both laughed.

Blue Pete saw that he must reduce his visits but he did not wish to let Slick out of his sight more than he could prevent. He would lie on a height and watch, sometimes even from the shadows of the forest up in the Hills. But always there he was careful to avoid the part where Slick had his camp. It forced him to confine his wanderings to the north-west corner, and from there some of the prairie to the south was hidden by the curve of the slope.

It was during one of those vigils that he became aware that Slick was using binoculars. He had not seen them before, and though he recognized their value he could not help wondering.

Then he noticed that there were times when the cowboy was not to be seen, the herd being held by the other puncher on

the trick. At such times the cattle were culled, so that a single cowboy could hold them.

One day he rode down to the herd when Slick was absent. "Workin' alone today, Buzz?" he asked.

"Reckon yu can count," replied Buzz shortly.

Blue Pete looked the herd over. "Purty poor lot. Might's well let 'em go, eh?"

"If I let 'em go here we'd have to round 'em up again. They gotta be driven away. Somebody else can do that. I'm not breakin' my back for all Jim Allen pays us." He jerked a thumb towards the west. "Tully'd drive 'em back, jus' to make more work for us."

"Yuh cud send 'em along the lake. The boys 'ud turn 'em loose that way."

"Slick'll tell me what to do with 'em," replied Buzz sullenly.

Something about it puzzled the half-breed, but he said nothing more and set off back up the slope into the Hills. He went without conscious direction, so that when he found himself entering the forest in the part where Slick's camp must be he turned towards the north, skirting the trees. Looking back, he saw that Buzz was watching him, and he turned directly into the forest.

He had gone no more than a few yards when Slick appeared before him, a quizzical smile on his handsome face.

"We aren't receiving visitors today, Pete," he said.

"Wal," returned the half-breed, "I ain't got no visitin' day muhself, an' I bin usin' these Hills long before yuh knew thar was any Hills. Tha're like home to me."

"You don't say. . . . You've been neglecting your home lately, haven't you? As a matter of fact we thought we'd be able to have some privacy here."

"Shure, shure! Me, too. But thar's lots o' room fer us all. Whiskers sorta likes the shade, too. I ain't particular whar she carries me. I ain' got much to do."

Slick watched him intently. "You work rather hard at it, don't you? I saw you down there talking to Buzz."

It was not quite a question, but Blue Pete knew that it called for an answer. "He looked sorta lonely. Holdin' a herd's purty hard work fer one puncher."

"He was succeeding, wasn't he? I'm careful about what I leave him to do."

"Shure, shure." He wondered if Slick suspected anything. "Yer boys 'a' bin doin' thur work durn well, I'd say."

"Thanks." Slick had reacted to the tone. "We've cleaned things up pretty well for the moment—that is, until Tully shunts some more of those bad fellows at us. Funny thing, he's been giving us a lot of miserable scrunts of late. I can't imagine where he picks them up. We have the trouble then of running them out on the prairie to get them away from the beef herd. One might think," he said, with one of his infectious laughs, "that he has something sinister in mind. But the fact is Buzz hasn't been alone long. There wasn't anything to do, so I couldn't turn down the invitation these cool shadows held out to me. By the way, I was going to have a sip of tea. Come along and share it with me."

Without waiting for a reply he wheeled Smarty about and led off through the trees.

Of her own accord Whiskers followed, and Blue Pete did not try to stop her. He was more than a little confused. Certainly Slick had resented his presence at first, had probably been watching him all the time he was talking to Buzz—and now came the invitation to visit his camp!

They followed a devious course, and Blue Pete smiled to himself. It was hopeless for Slick to think of confusing him as to location in that part of the Hills. At first they worked towards the north-east, then gradually eastward, later to the south and back a little to the west. It almost completed a circle. And Blue Pete saw that when Slick accosted him he had been very close to the camp.

In a tight little ravine they came on the camp-fire.

CHAPTER XIX

FOLLOWING A LEAD

THE OTHER two cowboys were there, and Blue Pete knew that they had been aware of him for some time. They were squatted before the fire, each with his gun held in the crook of his knee. It was a caution he himself had observed many a time—the gun in position to be drawn with least effort and delay. What he did not understand was the reason for such preparedness. Was it merely a habit—and why?

The fire burned briskly, and again it was only the driest wood that was being used. He remembered that he had seen or smelled no smoke until he was almost within sight of the fire. One might have ridden along the bank of the ravine without knowing the fire was there.

The two cowboys looked up carelessly but did not speak. But after a few moments the tension slackened, and one of them relaxed at full length on the ground, while the other straightened and stretched. Neither was for a moment out of touch with his gun.

The one lying on the ground had a roll of dough at his side. A ball of this he wrapped about the end of a stick that was then held over the fire. On a bed of live coals stood a large tin of tea.

Slick dismounted, leaving Smarty to run loose. "A bit primitive," he said, nodding at the fire, "but you'll understand and forgive. Anything's better than that frosty T-Inverted R camp. If they'd let us kill a beef we wouldn't go near the chuck-wagon at all. As it is we go only for one meal a day; the cook gives us the rest to eat here."

He threw himself down on a pile of spruce boughs evidently reserved for him and glowered moodily at the flames. Then he heaved a heavy sigh. "I expect there'll be trouble . . . and

the worst of it is we're not quite certain how to meet it. Where we come from we'd know how to protect ourselves, but one has to be careful in the handling of a gun over here. It's a nuisance. We don't know any other way to defend ourselves, and I expect there'll be the devil to pay."

Blue Pete said: "I don' think Tully'll go that far. The Mounties are on the job. He wudn' dast."

"Of course he wouldn't—in the open. But who'd expect Tully to do anything illegal in the open? You know what he had in mind that night right here in the Hills—and it wasn't to tickle our wrists. We got out of it that time, thanks to you, but if anything happened we, the strangers, would be suspect. We'd be sure to get the blame, because Tully would see to it that he had a host of witnesses to lie for him."

Blue Pete shook his head. "Yuh do' know the Mounties, Slick. Tully's host o' witnesses wudn' fool the sergeant none."

Slick lay back, his hands locked beneath his head, and fixed his eyes on the half-breed. "I wish . . . I wish we had you with us, Pete. If we had someone like you to stand up for us with the Mounties——"

"Yuh do' need nobody fer that."

"But there's certain to be trouble. We're not going to invite it, but we're not going to run from it. And you know where that's going to lead."

Blue Pete was disturbed. It was none of his business, so long as it did not interfere with the roundup, yet he was anxious, and partly for Slick's sake. Tully Mason was not one to let an enemy escape without further effort to satisfy his hatred, and he would have no difficulty, as Slick foresaw, in obtaining support from his friends. But only to a point. Blue Pete did not think they would back him in anything as extreme as Slick foresaw, but in a crisis, with Slick resisting, nothing would be too extreme.

The cowboy continued to stare at him, and there was appeal in his eyes. "I think you and I'd get along famously, Pete," he said at length.

The half-breed did not reply. He was waiting for more.

Slick raised himself and leaned towards the fire, to poke at

it thoughtfully with a stick. Suddenly he faced about. "Would you join us, Pete?"

The half-breed could not have told what he had waited for, but it was certainly not that, and his eyes opened with surprise. "Jine—jine yuh? Fer wot?"

The silence that followed embarrassed him, for Slick's eyes seemed to bore through him for a full minute. Then he smiled and turned away with a sigh, and his shoulders seemed to droop a little. But all he did was to wave towards his companions.

The one who had been baking the buns over the end of the stick, and laying them out on clean chips, picked a chip up and offered it to their visitor. The other emptied tea into a tin cup and passed it.

Blue Pete's eyes roved from one to another, puzzled and uncertain. He had a feeling that Slick's offer had not been a surprise to them.

When he had almost forgotten his own question, Slick answered it:

"Because we'd like to have you with us."

It was no answer, and Blue Pete repeated it, "Wot fer?"

A change came over Slick's face. "Say we're merely roving punchers and let it go at that. . . . Or perhaps we're professional bank-robbers. It doesn't matter what we are; we know you'd fit in. One could trust you in emergency." His eyes had not left the half-breed's face, and suddenly he chuckled. "We're ready to do almost anything to make life easy for ourselves—though we haven't yet got to bank-robbing. We make a good living—and we spend it. You might call us wastrels, dancing through life, but at least we're enjoying ourselves, yes, even here in Canada with Tully holding a gun on us." He turned to his friends. "We rather like Blue Pete, don't we, boys?"

They nodded and smiled but said nothing.

Slick sighed and reached for a biscuit. "All right. Then that's that. Let it drop and we'll just enjoy the tea. You can at least see the social life you're missing by not coming with us. But we won't speak of it again."

It was to the regret and disappointment in the tone that the half-breed replied: "I—I jes' cudn't. I——" He was almost regretful himself.

"That's all right. We won't speak of it again. . . . But if you ever think of changing your mind—— But you wouldn't know where to find us." He laughed. "We wouldn't know where to find ourselves a week ahead. But we'll be sticking around here for a few days more—perhaps a week after the roundup ends. That is, if Tully doesn't get the drop on us. We'd like to leave the taste of Tully Mason behind us when we leave Canada. We think this country deserves something better."

He clambered to his feet and stretched, and Blue Pete noticed the play of muscle in arms and legs and body. "A nice country, this, even with Tully sullyin' it. I've a sort of feeling—a sort of feeling"—his voice had dropped almost to a whisper, and his eyes were fixed on the tops of the trees on the bank before him—"that one might go straight here."

He appeared to waken, for his eyes dropped abruptly, and his shoulders shook as if throwing aside something that worried him. The merry chuckle that was so attractive altered the whole character of the scene. "'Go straight,' did I say? Funhy thing to say. Can anyone go straight in this old world and be comfortable? Mounties or no Mounties, I'll wager your richest ranchers right here don't live up to your laws. It's part of the game. . . . A foreman like Tully Mason must be valuable to such a rancher. Tully'd have no qualms about anything."

His eyes twinkled. "But you're a rancher yourself. I don't expect you to make a comment on a thing like that. If you did you'd have to deny it, and I wouldn't like to hear you lie. I don't believe you've practised it enough to fool anyone."

"I ain' goin' to do no lyin'," said the half-breed. "I done a bit o' rustlin' in my day. . . . No, that ain't jest right. I done a mighty lot of it. . . . Mostly 'cross the Border in the Badlan's. Didn' do nothin' most o' muh life. That was 'fore I come over here."

"Did coming to Canada change all that—just coming to Canada?"

Blue Pete was embarrassed by the question. He rubbed his chin. "Wal-l, no, not zackly that neither. I done a bit sence. That was 'fore—'fore Mira settled me down on the 3-Bar-Y. Ain't rustled none sence—not over here. Do' needta."

It appeared to excite Slick, for he leaned nearer, his eyes dancing. "Well, well! You don't say! And I'll bet you made a success of it."

"Shure. Too much success. The ranchers 'n' punchers over in the Badlan's was jealous. They drove me out—over here."

Slick shook his head and smiled. "No one ever drove you anywhere you didn't want to go. What's the truth of it, Pete? Come on now."

"Wal-l, either I hadta run er shoot 'em all, an' I ain' got room fer so many more notches on my gun."

He spoke so seriously that Slick laughed for a long time. "Sounds like you, Pete. But what about the Mounties? Didn't they get curious about you?"

Blue Pete had got himself so deeply into it that he was frightened, and he looked about as if for a means of escape.

Slick read the glance and grinned. "All right. It's your story. Keep it to yourself. I'm not prying." He poked the fire again for a time. "But—but it all fits in. You're such a damned good puncher . . . and you'd fit into our little group so well, but—but—" He rose briskly and swept some loose brush from his chaps. "Now I must get out and lend Buzz a hand or someone'll be getting curious about *me*."

He turned to his companions. "Go to the chuck-wagon and get your suppers, then come and relieve us. There won't be much to do tonight. Perhaps Texas will let us turn that scrawny bunch loose and have the night to ourselves for a change. I'll ask him."

Together he and the half-breed rode back through the forest, and again Slick led a roundabout course. Nevertheless he was not quite at ease, for he threw frequent sidelong glances at his silent companion as they rode.

Blue Pete had noticed many things. The ever-ready guns told a story he wanted to hear in its entirety. The location of the camp, too, had been changed recently. It was now more carefully concealed, and as they climbed from the ravine he saw where someone had lain for a long time, protected by a clump of cedar but in a position to see in every direction. Slick and his friends were not going to be taken by surprise.

It amused him to see how well Smarty and Whiskers got along together. Whiskers made few friends; there was something of a snob about her. Only with Jupiter, Sergeant Mahon's broncho, had she previously shown any real companionship. Now she appeared to have added Smarty to the limited list. And yet there was a difference. Her manner was more showy, more jaunty and ostentatious, as if in challenge.

Slick noticed it and laughed. "Nice bit of horse-flesh you have there, Pete," he said. "Too bad she's so small."

"Size don't hurt her none," defended the half-breed.

"But if she were larger——"

"Mebbe she wudn' have so much brains."

Slick laughed and patted Smarty's neck in a proudly possessive way. "Is she fast?"

"Fastest in these parts—an' that means anywhars."

"Until Smarty came on the scene, you mean."

"I said fastest," repeated Blue Pete firmly.

"You'd hate to be disillusioned about that, wouldn't you?"

"I ain't likely to be."

"Well," said Slick, "I hope we don't have to settle the argument—for your satisfaction. I've met nothing so far that can hold Smarty's pace."

"Yuh'd hate to be—to be cheated outa that, wudn' yuh?"

"I'm not likely to be," laughed Slick.

They rode silently for a time before Slick said: "You know, I'm feeling a little blue. I'd hoped you and I might travel together; we'd get along so well. But I said we wouldn't mention it again," he added hurriedly, and sighed. They had reached the edge of the forest, and the prairie lay before

them. Slick pointed. "Lovely view, isn't it? I don't blame you for liking the Hills."

Involuntarily they had pulled their mounts to a stop.

"Thar ain't no place like it," said Blue Pete.

"Do you come here often?"

"Now 'n' ag'in. Durn nice to git into the shade—whar thar ain't nobody else."

Slick studied him soberly. "Then you must know the place pretty well, every hill and hollow. I'll bet you could pick your way around blindfolded."

Blue Pete was cautious. "Take more time 'n I got to know the Hills like that. It's a big place—thousan's o' hills an' hollows, an' most o' them's alike. Durn easy to get lost in here. I don' take no chances; I keep purty much to the edges."

"I should say that's wise. . . . The little I know of them I should think nobody would come to them if they didn't have to. Isn't that so?"

"Shure is. Thar's lots o' things ain't nice to meet up 'th in here. Thar's wolves an' things. Punchers hate the place; they keep the cows out. . . . Now 'n' then rustlers come this way." He shook his head warningly. "Bes' not let the cows come in here. Had any trouble 'th 'em?"

Slick shook his head. "We always head them off. Just now I'll bet there isn't a cow within a mile of this end of the Hills that we don't know about. Texas honoured us by putting us here; he knew we could handle them."

They still remained within the shadow of the trees, high over the prairie. Below them lay the expanse of the roundup. Off to the right lay Elk Lake, a long strip of greenish-blue unruffled by wind. Beyond was the line of chuck-wagons. To the north-west they could see the herd ready for the drive to the railway, some in motion, being driven in for inspection, some urged away to the west to get them out of the way. Directly below them was the small herd held by Buzz, and farther west was another herd that would be in Tully Mason's care.

Blue Pete's eyes were fixed on that herd, so that he was scarcely aware of Slick's sudden movement towards the small

bag hanging from the saddle-horn. But when the binoculars came out, he turned and followed the direction of the glasses towards the south.

He needed no glasses. He saw what had interested Slick, but he said nothing. Away there lay the Border between Alberta and Montana, something more than a dozen miles of treeless prairie.

And there, almost half-way to the Border, was movement—movement that disappeared presently into a coulee and, as they watched, emerged on the other side, working swiftly towards the south.

It was a small herd of four cattle, and behind were two riders. Blue Pete glanced away to the other herd that had interested him, and he understood why it was held by so few punchers.

Slick lowered the glasses and turned to him. On his lips was a curious smile. "I think you understand," he said.

"Shure." The half-breed grunted. "An' I know them punchers. I cud tell 'em far's I cud see 'em. That's Tully Mason an' Morgan, one o' Tully's boys." He jerked on the reins and Whiskers dashed away. "C'mon. We gotta git down outa this quick, an' we gotta go keerful. No, don't go that way. Tha're watchin' mebbe from t'other herd."

He led back into the trees and sent the pinto along towards the south. Reaching a depression he followed it out through the forest and down the long slope towards the south-west. Slick followed closely, now and then chuckling audibly.

When they reached the higher level on the prairie they saw that the little herd was trying to escape to the east, probably to get back into the Hills. But Tully quickly headed them off and started them again towards the south.

Keeping to the coulees, Blue Pete and Slick saw nothing for a time. The half-breed remained in the lead, and both bronchos drove ahead at almost full speed, twisting and turning to keep out of sight in the lower levels.

Slick pushed up beside his companion. "It's a great game, isn't it? Tully's a fine foreman—for himself. He must feel lost without that cut-out bronc of his. Pal must have been a great help in a game like this."

Blue Pete made no reply. He was worried. On and on they went in the blazing late afternoon sun, seeing little but the dead grass of the coulee banks and the blinding sky.

Slick became impatient. "We'll miss them if we keep on blindly like this," he protested. "I'm all tangled up. If it weren't for the sun I wouldn't know what direction we're going most of the time. It seems to me we've gone in all directions. It'll take us till night to overtake them this way."

Suddenly Blue Pete pulled in and sat listening. "We ain't so far from 'em now. Tha're making a bit to the east, so's to git behind the Hills. . . . An' them cows know wot's happenin' an' tha're hard to handle. They wanta git back."

Slick dismounted and scrambled up the slope before them. There he lay down, looking away towards the south-west. After a moment or two he turned and beckoned. Blue Pete grimaced, sighed, and rode slowly towards his companion.

Dismounting, he crawled up beside Slick who had turned with a frown.

"They must have seen me," the latter growled. "They're making a great show of turning the cows back. I guess the joke's on us."

"Reckon so—now. Might's well go back. On'y thing fer us now," Blue Pete added, with frank disgust, "is to look's if we ain't seen nothin'. Them cows'll be back in the herd tonight."

Slick lay back and kicked his feet in the air. "My, how Tully will love us for this! It was a nasty unfriendly trick to play on him, just when he had those nice fat fellows in hand. I wonder how many he's got away before this."

A new light appeared in the half-breed's eyes. "Yuh ain't hired to work fer Allen, are yuh?"

"I wouldn't work for that outfit if they gave me the whole herd."

"Then yuh don't hev to hang around—yuh kin go anywhere any time?"

"Of course. What do you mean?" Slick stared eagerly into the half-breed's crooked eyes.

"How 'bout a bit o' scoutin'?"

Slick's eyes danced with excitement. "Count me in. The boys can get along without me for a day or two. Where to from here?"

A grin spread slowly over the half-breed's face. "Yuh shure yuh don' mind Tully hatin' yuh wuss 'n ever? All right, let's git back to Buzz. Mus' be five o'clock. Bes' eat a big meal. Mebbe need it 'fore we're through."

CHAPTER XX

SEPARATING ENEMIES

BY THE time they reached the small herd Buzz had held they found that the other two cowboys had eaten and had come to relieve their companions.

Just before they reached them Blue Pete said: "I'll speak to Tex 'fore we start. An' now reckon you an' me bes' not be seen together. You go to the chuck-wagon. Buzz'll be thar. I'll git round t'other side of the lake an' speak to Tex."

He turned up the slope towards the Hills and disappeared into the forest. Slick, watching, saw him reappear after a time far to the north and ride down around the north end of the lake. He laughed. He winked at his friends.

"Boys," he laughed, "I'm in for more fun than I ever expected, and I'm going to be in the right company to make the most of it. Go easy on the herding till I get back. You had better lie low until I return. Keep an eye on things in the Hills, that's all. We'll have lots of time for everything when I get back."

He rode away to the T-Inverted R chuck-wagon and threw himself on the grass beside Buzz, apart from the other cowboys. No one spoke to them. The meal was almost ready, and when the call came they stood in line and received their filled plates.

They ate slowly and in silence. Slick appeared too deep in thought to notice anything about him, for often his face broadened to a grin. He had seated himself facing the south, so that he was aware of the approach of the riders while they were still far away. And the smile broadened, though he appeared to pay no attention. A couple of cowboys had left the camp some time before; they freed Tully and Morgan to come to eat. The foreman did not so much as glance towards Slick, but he was plainly in a vile temper, for he slammed

his way up to the chuck-wagon for his plate, stumped back, and crashed himself down with his back even to his friends. No one had uttered a word.

The cook, an elderly man, noticed it, and his glance moved from one group to the other as he worked about the fire, and his head shook solemnly. He had lived his life among the punchers; he knew the symptoms.

At the 3-Bar-Y chuck-wagon Blue Pete ate in silence. He, too, was thinking, and by the expression on his dusky face his thoughts were gloomy. He had made up his mind that something must be done, and Texas was the one to do it. But it was going to make trouble, and he would probably get the blame. Any danger to himself that might come of it did not enter his mind, but his undercover connection with the Mounted Police demanded that he make as few active enemies among the punchers as possible. It was part of his effectiveness in the work he did for the Police that he should be on good terms with them all. At the same time he preferred that if trouble came it should be through Tully Mason who was not generally popular.

When he had finished his meal he beckoned Texas aside. "Reckon yuh bes' shift the boys about a bit out thar, Tex," he advised, jerking a thumb towards the south.

Texas frowned. "Why, what's happened now?"

"Bes' git Tully outa thar."

"Has him and Slick been at it again?"

"'Tain't that—not zackly." He hesitated, rubbing a hand uneasily across his chin. "Tully's too durn close to the Badlan's."

Texas's eyes opened wide and his lips pursed to a soundless whistle. "You—don't say!"

"I seen 'nuff," said Blue Pete, and closed his lips.

Texas nodded understandingly. "I see. I've been wonderin' . . . That explains a lot . . . but it means trouble."

"It means more trouble ef yuh don' do nothin'. We need our own cows this side the Border. We ain't roundin' up beef fer Tully to feed the Badlan's."

Texas silently regarded the half-breed for several moments,

then he turned and strode away. A broncho was brought and he mounted and rode along the lake.

Before the T-Inverted R chuck-wagon he turned in and stopped. Tully gave no sign that he saw him, continuing to gulp at his food.

Texas rode up to him. "I'm makin' a change, Tully," he announced abruptly. "The Double X has too much on its hands off there to the north. A lot of cows are tryin' to escape that way. I'm sendin' yu to help. Take yer men with yu."

Tully raised glowering eyes, his mouth still full. He swallowed. "I got a real job where I am, ain't I? An' I'm doin' it, ain't I?"

"Sure. I'm not complainin'. But the cows are pretty well cleared away out there now, and yu're needed more with the Double X. Welch's outfit has more than it can do."

"Let 'em ride more," growled Tully, and fell to eating again. "We've had more'n our share o' the work," he continued, when he could speak. "Jus' 'cause we do our work quick yu're sendin' us to do somebody else's."

Texas felt himself growing angry, and he did not wish to lose control. For several seconds he stared straight into the angry foreman's eyes. "I've told yu what I want, Tully," he said at last. "Are yu goin' to do what I say—or will I give orders to cut the T-Inverted R beef loose—and then report yu to the ranchers?"

Tully gulped. "Yu wouldn't do that."

"Tully," said Texas slowly, "I'm captain of the roundup. Yu'll do what yu're told." He took a long breath and continued more quietly. "I wouldn't give those orders without good reason."

Tully lumbered to his feet, his face a thundercloud. "Yes, yu're captain," he growled, "but 'tain't fair. I know who got yu to do this. Damn his hide!"

"What did yu say?" Texas demanded angrily.

Tully replied with another question: "Whatchu doin' with them Yanks?"

"They'll stay where they are. They've done the work of twice their number. Yu shouldn't object to seein' the last o' them."

"Whose takin' over our place?"

"The Triangle H; they'll do both sections."

A nasty grin creased the foreman's face. "Yu should give it to the Yanks, jus' to keep 'em busy. I seen that Slick away off to the south. He ain't half workin'."

"He ain't paid to work. What were you doin' off to the south?"

Tully scowled at him. "Morgan an' me was after a wild bunch that near got away."

"You got 'em back?"

"We're punchers, ain't we?" snarled Tully.

Texas rode away along the lake to the south. At that end of the lake Blue Pete, who had ridden round the east side, joined him. In Texas's face he read some of the story.

"He didn't like it, eh?"

"He'd like to refuse. He dassent."

"He's goin' then?"

"He has to."

They said nothing more until they came within sight of the small bunch held by Slick's friends.

Blue Pete said, "Measly bunch, that, ain't they? Takes a puncher's time holdin' 'em, an' they ain't no good." He noticed Texas eyeing him enquiringly, and he added: "Tha're goin' to be shorthanded. Slick's goin' ta hev suthin' else to do fer a day or two. Him an' me we're goin' to be busy."

"Yu mean," Texas complained, "yu're not goin' to tell me what it is yu'll be doin'."

Blue Pete shrugged. "Yuh bes' not know . . . not till we come back, anyways. Slick 'n' me we ain't workin' at the roundup. Thar'll be three o' Slick's boys left."

"Yu mean yu don't want 'em to have much work to do?"

"Shure. Slick 'n' me we're goin' to hev a look . . . at places."

Texas rode round the little herd, looking them over. He shook his head. "No good, them." He glanced towards where Tully's men could be seen. "Better drive 'em towards the lake. I'll have 'em picked up there and driven out to the west two-three miles. Back of the Triangle H the prairie's clear. I'll help yu drive 'em along."

They started the herd towards the lake. It avoided Tully and his men. Slick met them as he was returning from the chuck-wagon, and he rode aside to let them pass. He merely waved and went on.

In a coulee Blue Pete was waiting for him. When he saw Slick's eyes fixed on the parcel fastened to the cantle, he explained: "Wing put some chuck up fer us. We'll need it 'fore we're back. I dassent ast yuh to git any. Ef we need more I know where the ranch-houses are over thar. I lived on 'em lots o' times. They don't like me any better fer it, neither."

Slick appeared to enjoy some picture aroused in his mind. "I'll bet they don't. Those must have been the grand old days of your rustling. You must have lost a lot of fun when you gave it up."

"I got other fun what's funnier," declared the half-breed. "But we gotta hurry. I wanta be back when the sergeant gits back from the Hat. He's apt to ast nasty questions."

"And I'll bet," said Slick, "you have the answers ready."

"Wal-l, I ain't gittin' into no trouble 'th the Mounties ef I don't needta."

"All right, I'm ready. What's the next move?"

"We'll wait here till it's dark 'nuff so nobody's apt to see whar we're makin' fer."

"This is your adventure," said Slick. "I'm taking orders. One thing, I'd like to have time to say something to my boys."

"Shure. I'll go along."

But Slick shook his head firmly. "No, I want to talk to them alone. It's going to throw a lot of work on three men. With two always on duty it'll mean little sleep." He rode away, following the coulee for a time, then climbing the slope into the forest.

Blue Pete dismounted and crept up the side of the coulee, where he threw himself in the grass and watched Slick until he disappeared. Then he returned to Whiskers, his head shaking uneasily.

It was dark when Slick returned. He came silently, entering the coulee from the southern end. So silently did he come

that even Whiskers was unaware of him until he was only a few yards away.

In the darkness they set off towards the south.

Montana lay a dozen miles in that direction, the dividing line commonly called the Border. Every foot of the intervening prairie the half-breed knew, so that he was able to plan a course where they would not be seen even by prowlers. Many a time he had crossed that dozen miles, sometimes pursued, sometimes in pursuit. South of that invisible line he knew that every gun would be turned against him.

CHAPTER XXI

RETRIEVING A HERD

FOR THREE or four miles they went slowly that they might not be heard. In the stillness of the night every sound carried to unbelievable distances. Smarty and Whiskers pranced along, both showing off, both resenting restraint. Smarty managed always to keep his nose ahead.

Slick noticed it and laughed. "Smarty recognizes a rival. Or perhaps that little pinto of yours brings out the male in him. He's showing off. It isn't often he meets the other sex under a saddle."

"Not more'n three er four punchers use 'em up here," said Blue Pete. "A few more over in Montany."

"You know Montana pretty well, don't you?"

"It's thar I done my rustlin'. I know 'em all—every ranch an' every rancher. I rustled from all o' them." He laughed. "I rustled *fer* all o' them, too."

"Did I understand you to say you did some rustling in Canada, too?"

For a few moments Blue Pete was silent. "That was a long time ago. I ain't rustled up here fer a long time. But," he added, "I done a bit over in the Badlan's jes' las' year. Got a lot o' kick outa it, too—mixin' up herds an' fixin' bran's. They do' like me down thar."

He leaned forward to pat Whiskers' neck. "Yuh see, they rustled th' ole gal an' run her down to the Badlan's. . . . Lots o' fun gettin' her back. I like 'em to hate me now." Suddenly he asked, "You know the Badlan's?"

Slick hesitated. "I spent a few weeks there on my way up, the boys and I."

"Happen to meet Rance Hewitt of the Circle K?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I was wonderin' how his arm is. I busted it fer him."

"Oh, that explains something." Slick clacked his lips. "What a man! Yes, I did happen to meet Hewitt—on the way through."

"Er Clayton Fisk of the 7-Cross-J, er the 4L, er the 9T, er the A-Bar-A?"

Slick gave a short laugh. "You don't expect me to know the Badlands like that."

"I shure had a lot o' fun over thar," declared Blue Pete with a nostalgic sigh.

"You make it sound interesting, even exciting. You almost tempt me to try my own hand at a bit of rustling. Perhaps I'd enjoy it more than wandering about with an accordion. But tramping gets into one's system."

"Yuh ain't tramped all yer life," declared Blue Pete. "Yuh wudn' hev them fittin's ef yuh had, you 'n' Smarty."

"If you're suggesting that Smarty and I came by them dishonestly"—he stopped to chuckle—"you're right. At least some might call it dishonest, the Mounties, for instance. It all depends on how you look at things. Is it wrong to steal from thieves? Smarty and I work on a theory that has panned out rather well to date. We figure that anyone who tries to be smart with us—has to be mighty smart. Most of them discover it too late—and so Smarty has a Sunday outfit that makes most people wonder. It happens, too, that I like to dress—well, showily, shall we say? Someone has to pay for that. Oh, are you stopping already?"

Blue Pete had come close in the dark and had touched his arm. "I'm goin' to take a look."

"But—but it's too dark. What can you hope to see?"

"All I needta. I got eyes that kin hear, an' ears that kin see—'sides wot they do fer others."

He dismounted and disappeared. He was back in a few minutes.

"Thar's a coulee ahead we kin hide in till daylight. I know the way whar we kin ride right into Montany 'thout bein' seen, but I wanta see ef the cows come this way, so I gotta wait till it's light."

Slick dismounted and they lay down to wait for daylight, letting their bronchos loose. An embarrassing silence fell over

them, the silence of men who want to speak but fear to—a companionship that has advanced too swiftly. There were many questions Blue Pete longed to ask—and Slick knew it. Neither wished to embarrass the other. It seemed to amuse Slick, for he broke into low chuckles at intervals. Blue Pete it made morose and uneasy.

With the first rosiness in the eastern sky they were ready to move.

"We gotta be keerful now," the half-breed warned. "Mebbe we won't find nothin'. Mebbe wot we're lookin' fer finds us fust. Then thar'll be trouble. Mebbe they got the cows run off too far fer us to run 'em down, but I don't think so. Tully'd hold 'em till the roundup's over. 'Sides he wudn' trust nobody else to turn 'em in."

"But over there in all those Badlands," Slick puzzled, "I don't see how you can hope to find anything."

"Thar's on'y two-three ways to git into the Badlan's from Alberta—I mean, to git anywhars to git rid o' the cows. I know 'em all. Tully wudn' run 'em far till he's free to handle 'em. He musta got somebody to hold 'em, I'm thinkin'. It 'ud be easy in the Badlan's, 'cause yuh kin jes' go er come back. Cows git in thar an' they wudn' run nowhars 'less they was drove. Lots o' nice grass in the valleys, an' water. I'll find thur tracks ef they bin this way."

They rode away, Blue Pete bent forward in the saddle to examine the ground in the dull light. They had not gone far when Slick pointed. "What's that?" It was a metal post on a higher point before them.

"Didn't yuh see 'em when yuh was comin' over? Montany's t'other side o' them posts." He laughed low in his throat. "Means a mighty lot to the Mounties. Don' mean a durn thing to us. We're after them cows, an' all the sheriffs in Montany won't stop us ef we ketch up to 'em. Them sheriffs ain't much when yuh know the Mounties—not 'ceptin' Iron Jack Logan. But he's 'way too far south fer us to meet him this time. We cudn' chase them cows that far."

After a time he turned towards the east. "Reckon Tully'd take this other way into the Badlan's, whar the Hills 'ud hide him most o' the way."

Suddenly he stopped and pointed to the ground. "Shure. Thar they bin. They come this way like I said. It's the way I'd 'a' drove 'em." He turned aside and rode into a coulee. "Bes' stop here an' think a bit wot to do next."

The prairie had been growing noticeably rougher. Ever since sunrise they had found no difficulty in keeping to the depressions, and their horizons had been limited.

Presently the half-breed said: "The Badlan's is jes' ahead. I'm countin' on the cows bein' kep' as near this end as they can be hid. Tully knows better'n to git 'em down so far other rustlers might find 'em an' help themselves. Rustlin' from rustlers is easiest. That's the way I done most of it. The Badlan's is full o' rustlers. I allus worked alone, so it was easiest to rustle when the cows was already rustled fer me. They picked 'em out, got 'em started, then I came in. Lots more fun, too—the shootin' an' all that. . . . Don't ever 'member rustlin' from anyone owns the cows. Reckon that's mebbe why they hate me so down this way."

He urged Whiskers forward. "We'll git along this way. Reckon I know whar them cows is headin'. Tully shure must know the Badlan's better'n he otta. Thar's easy feedin' whar he drove 'em. We got to look out we don't ride bang into 'em, 'cause we don' know who's holdin' 'em ner how many. We gotta git round 'em somehow an' turn 'em back."

He set off towards the east and after a time turned to the south. Presently they entered a gully that grew deeper and deeper as they advanced, until cliffs lined them in on either side, with a small stream gurgling along on their right.

Twisting and turning with the depression that before long became a canyon, the heat beat down on them more and more fiercely as the sun rose. Slick was panting and impatient. He was about to speak when Blue Pete pulled in and sat examining the face of the cliff on his left. Dismounting, he walked up and down, frowning at the broken rock face.

"I gotta git up here somewhars," he muttered.

"Are we going to leave the bronchos here without a guard?" Slick demanded.

The half-breed threw a scornful glance at him. "I ain't leavin' Whiskers nowhars alone in the Badlan's. Everybody

knows her. You're goin' to stay. I'm goin' up thar alone—somehow. I do' need no help. Thar's a big cut over that way an' I gotta see wot's in it. 'Tain't far . . . but I gotta climb up somewhars fust, an' that ain't easy nowhairs here." He considered for a moment, then pointed ahead along the canyon. "'Long thar this cut jines another—t'other one I'm goin' to look at. Ef them cows are whar I think they are we gotta head 'em off thar. Ef they've gone on further it's goin' to be a difficult job, 'cause we gotta git ahead o' them somehow. Watch fer my signal, then yuh gotta make fer the place whar the cuts jine. Mebbe gotta go fast, too. Whiskers'll help yuh stop the cows. She do' need me."

He followed along the base of the cliff, examining it carefully all the way to the top. At the turn in the canyon he stopped and let his eye run carefully upward. Whiskers had followed, and he led her against the cliff, climbed into the saddle, and stood up to reach a ledge above his head. He managed to draw himself up to it, and from there he clawed his way to the top. There he waved back at Slick and disappeared.

From that elevation he could see for miles in every direction. It was the original prairie level before prehistoric floods had cut through to form the Badlands. To the north the Cypress Hills rose against the sky. Ahead and to his left clusters of tree-tops were visible, the untouched growth of hidden valleys. He knew them all, beautiful little valleys where cattle might feed without a care for months. He had used them often himself for his rustled cows. He had fought in them, killed in them, had been chased and had chased others. In them he had spent the most colourful hours of his exciting career.

After a time he stopped and sniffed the air, and a smile of satisfaction lined his dark face. Cows were there somewhere and not far away. He hurried forward.

It was more than half a mile to the canyon, and he did not go straight forward but swung away to the south, his eyes on a dark mass of tree-tops.

A distant steer bellowed suddenly—then another.

Directly towards the south he hurried. Nearing the edge of the cliff he slowed down. There had been no other sound, and

the echoes from the cliff walls made location difficult and deceiving. But he was satisfied that he would find them easily enough, and from the height where he was.

He dropped to his knees and crawled to the edge of the cliff.

When he could look down into the canyon he was not surprised. Directly below him, in a tight little valley he himself had used more than once, was a herd. A glance counted them—fourteen, and fourteen of the fattest steers he had seen in the roundup. He looked about for the cowboy who must have them in charge—and there he had a surprise.

Lying on a shaded bed of pine needles beneath a tree was Malsey, the cowboy Sergeant Mahon had ordered from the roundup. Malsey appeared to be asleep, and the half-breed watched him for several minutes to make sure. In that valley herding was simple.

Working out a plan as he watched, Blue Pete presently slid back and picked himself up. There was one way, and it not only offered a good chance of success but entailed no exposure. He did not wish Tully to know who had spoiled his game, if he could help it. Nor did he wish to fight for the cattle.

Making his way towards the south, beyond the cattle, he walked boldly out to the edge of the cliff. Everything was as he had left it, the cattle had not yet seen him. Without a sound then he commenced to wave his arms and to leap about.

The movement against the sky caught the attention immediately of some of the cattle, and they raised their heads excitedly. In a moment every one of them was watching, excitedly crowding together, nervous and snorting.

He had taken a chance there, and it had failed him. Malsey, whether he had been asleep or not, heard the noise and sat up, and his eyes lifted to where the cattle were staring. Then with a leap he was on his feet and racing towards his broncho, and Blue Pete, who had failed to get out of sight in time, heard the cattle set off in a stampede. It was towards the south, however, not towards the north as he had hoped, and Malsey was adding to their terror, driving them madly before him.

The half-breed had no time to lose, and he set off at full speed towards the canyon where Slick was waiting for him. At all cost they must get to the junction of the two canyons or the cattle would be lost. Cutting across to the nearest point where Slick would be able to see him, he reached the overhanging cliff. Slick was looking for him, and at the signal he set off along the canyon, Whiskers following closely behind.

Both canyons twisted and turned in their courses, so that Blue Pete was able to cut across and reach the junction from above even before Slick, and he slithered down the ragged wall, tearing both hands a little.

They were just in time. The cattle could be heard coming, though they were growing tired from the run and narrow passages where they had crowded one another off stride. By the sound Blue Pete read their very mood, and he smiled confidently at his companion. But he did not minimize the danger. If Malsey saw them in time to start the cattle off once more on a stampede their position at the junction was not only dangerous but impossible, for the gorge was too narrow to hope to escape the rush of madly charging steers.

Malsey, however, had not foreseen the interception. He had probably figured that if the stampede continued too long the cattle might disperse into branching canyons and be lost, for he could do nothing from behind to control them. And so he had ceased to excite them and was merely following at a distance.

When he came in sight of the two figures blocking the gorge it was too late. The cattle had stopped, undecided what to do. Malsey drew his rifle, but both Blue Pete and Slick were ready for him and he saw it in time to wheel about, without raising his gun, and dash back out of sight.

Blue Pete rode slowly towards the herd. He knew how to handle them, and with Slick's assistance, after some difficulty in turning them in the narrow passage, they succeeded in starting them back towards the north.

When they reached the valley where Malsey had held them they stopped. The half-breed was laughing.

"Nasty trick, eh, Slick? I know zackly how Tully'll feel.

I bin thar muhself. But Malsey's makin' tracks so fast he ain't thinkin' o' nothin' but gittin' away from the Badlan's rustlers. . . . That is, ef he didn' know who we are. I'm countin' on that he run so fast he didn' take time fer that. He's tickled to git off 'th a whole skin. . . . Mebbe he seen me up thar on the cliff. I dunno. 'Course Tully'll do a bit o' guessin'—an' mebbe he'll guess right." He shook his head gloomily, but in a moment he brightened. "Oh, wal, we gotta git the cows back, an' we ain't goin' to talk to nobody 'bout it. Tully can guess, but he can't be shure. . . . But won't he be sore!"

CHAPTER XXII

A TRAINED BRONCHO

THEY STARTED the cattle back, and when they reached the north end of the canyon and came out on the open prairie there were still some hours of daylight. For a time then they let the animals drift along, to have them fresher for the night drive to the Hills.

Blue Pete was worried. "We gotta do some mighty ticklish herdin' now, Slick," he said. "We gotta keep them cows outa sight till we git near the Hills, an' 'tain't goin' to be easy fer jes' the two of us. I know the coulees, an' we gotta keep the cows in 'em, but it's a lot longer drive than goin' straight."

Slick, too, was anxious. "But that's impossible—I mean keeping them out of sight. Anyway, what does it matter? We have the cows, and Tully won't dare say a word about it."

"But I do' wanta be seen," insisted the half-breed. "Reckon we kin do it. We'll keep 'em workin' east so the Hills'll cover us. Then when it's darker we can run 'em back to the end o' the Hills to be picked up." He grinned. "We'll give 'em to your boys. Tex'll be s'prised at so many big fellows comin' in jes' now. Bet thar ain't nothin' to beat 'em in the hull roundup. Tully shure has a good eye fer beef."

After a time he asked, "Bin readin' the bran's?"

Slick had paid no attention to them, and the half-breed pointed. "Sorta s'prisin', too. Thar ain't a T-Inverted R in the hull bunch. He ain't bad 'nuff to rustle from his own ranch. But thar's six 3-Bar-Y's. Mira 'n' me was in fer a loss. Yuh'd think Tully didn' like us. The rest are a mixed lot."

They herded the cattle towards the east and managed to keep them well in depressions during the remainder of the daylight.

Blue Pete studied the sky. "It's goin' to take us all night to git 'em back," he fretted. "Reckon we can't wait till it's real dark. They'll be purty tired, so we can't drive 'em too fast. . . . Tex was goin' to move Tully further north, so mebbe he won't see us, even if Malsey got word to him. . . . Wonder whar that Malsey is now. We do' wanta fergit him. He's a nasty skunk. Seen his tracks cuttin' off this way. He do' wanta be seen no more'n we do, but he got a coupla hours' start, an' he kin travel fast. He'll be at the Hills awready. Keep an eye on that brute over thar, Slick. Looks like he seen the cows over north, an' he wants to make fer 'em. I'll keep the bunch goin'."

By night they had reached a point where the Hills concealed them from the chuck-wagons along the lake, and there they turned directly towards the north. Later, when it was dark enough, they worked back towards the west and hurried the cattle forward. The animals had come farther than usual, but they had been driven slowly most of the way and they had been well rested and fed in the valley where Malsey was holding them, and they moved at a fair pace and without much trouble.

Towards morning they were skirting the Hills. "Looks like we'll make it in time," Blue Pete offered. "I was afeerd——"

A rifle shot broke sharply from the direction of the forest, and a bullet whistled close enough for Slick to hear it. Almost with the sound he was out of the saddle, and Smarty lay on his side before him.

Blue Pete had not moved. "Ain't nothin' we kin do 'bout it, Slick. That's Malsey; he's jes' shootin' at the noise we make. C'mon. We ain't got no time."

Several minutes later there came another shot, but this time no bullet was heard. Blue Pete was puzzled.

"'Tain't nobody shootin' at us that time," he said. "The gun wasn' facin' this way."

Slick chuckled. "I know that gun. It's one of the boys. We keep this end of the Hills well covered—I think I told you that before—and I was waiting for something like that. Whoever it was that shot at us, he's dodging bullets himself

right now." Later he added: "It's dangerous for anyone to wander in this end of the Hills. The boys are taking no chances, and you can't blame them. Surely we can be left alone."

"The Hills," declared Blue Pete, "don't belong to nobody."

"But we've taken a temporary lease on this end, and we must protect ourselves. You should know that, after what Tully tried to do."

It was early daylight when the herd turned the corner of the Hills. Dave was waiting for them and without a word he turned in beside Slick and joined the drive.

The half-breed eyed him for a time without speaking, then, "Hit anybody?"

Before replying Dave glanced at Slick, and the latter smiled and nodded. "I didn't dast," he said. "Them shots would be heard maybe. I'm afraid the Mounties would ask questions. But," he added, with a laugh, "I sure scared the daylight's outa him. I bet he's runnin' yet."

"Didja see who 'twas?"

"Naw, it was too dark. He never let me get close enough anyways."

"But yuh knew he was thar, eh?"

Dave appeared puzzled at the inquiry. "I heard the shot."

"Yuh got thar in a hurry afterwards," said Blue Pete.

Slick said, "There isn't anything can happen in this end of the Hills, as I said, that we aren't on hand to see about it, some one of us. Anyone who goes poking about there is apt to get into trouble. . . . And you can pass that on to the others," he added.

A few minutes later Blue Pete pulled the pinto in. "I ain' goin' no furdur. I do' wanta be seen. When yuh turn the cows in yuh bes' not say anythin' 'bout me. I'm goin' to tell Tex all he needs to know an' no more. Ef the punchers wonder whar yuh got sech a nice bunch yuh kin say yuh got 'em hidin' in the Hills. Tully'll know but he dassent say nothin'. S'long!"

He turned back and, when well out of sight of the chuck-wagons, turned up the long slope into the Hills.

He had gone only a few yards in the trees when a rider appeared before him from the cover of a thicket. It was

Buzz, and there was nothing welcoming in the look he gave the half-breed.

The latter waved to him. "Jes' lef' Slick 'n' Dave back thar," he explained. "Slick 'n' me we bin doin' a bit o' wot yuh might call rustlin' on our own. 'Cross the Border."

Buzz's face lit up with excitement. "Yu join'n' us, like Slick said?"

The half-breed's attention appeared to be fixed on the buckle of the strap holding his rope to the saddle-horn. "No, 'twasn't that. Tully Mason's bin doin' some smart work. He won't feel so smart now. It's Slick 'n' me that feel sorta smart." He raised his eyes. "But yuh bes' watch out fer him now. He'll be mad."

The cowboy's expression had dulled, had become hostile again. "Then wotch'chu doin' here?"

"I lef' Slick back thar. I didn' wanta be seen. I'm cuttin' through this way to tell Tex about it. Oh," with a smile, "I ain't buttin' in on nobody. Slick told me yuh wanta be alone this end the Hills. I was jes' ridin' through. I ain't interferin' none."

Buzz's manner softened. "We have to look after ourselves. You know that. Where's Slick now?"

"Him 'n' Dave's drivin' the cows to the beef herd. Tha're dandies, them cows. I wanta git to Tex 'fore he knows 'bout 'em."

He rode on into the forest, but for a long time he could feel Buzz watching him. Slick was right: he and his friends were taking no chances.

The half-breed grinned down on Whiskers. "An' yuh can't blame 'em none, eh, old gal? Ef we was them we'd feel the same . . . on'y we ain't them. They wanta be lef' alone . . . an' I dunno that I'll do it."

He kept close to the edge of the forest but concealed from the prairie. He knew that Buzz was not likely to let him out of his sight until he was well beyond their camp. At the north-west corner of the lake he rode boldly down the slope. No one was likely to be interested in his movements; everyone knew he spent most of his time in the Hills.

Texas was not at the 3-Bar-Y chuck-wagon when he reached

it. He was told the captain had gone to the beef herd. By that time the herd had grown to such a size that it required much attention, and Texas was making arrangements for the drive to the railway. For a time Blue Pete waited, impatient and grumbling to himself, and at last he set off towards the herd.

He met Texas returning and was welcomed with strange eagerness. "I been lookin' for you, Pete. I was wonderin' where yu'd gone. Yu didn't tell me, an' I didn't ask."

"I bin shure lookin' fer you, too, Tex. I wanta find the sergeant."

"He hasn't turned up yet; at least I ain't seen him. We're goin' to start the drive tomorrow or the next day. I'm splittin' the herd into three parts. One might start this afternoon—if I think we can spare the punchers. I've sent out some of Tully's boys to keep off the cows we've turned loose. They'll join in and make a mess of things if we don't keep 'em off. It would mean a lot of cuttin' at the railway, an' yu know the boys don't want any hard work like that then, not after what they've been through. Besides, we don't wanta take more punchers on the drive than we need. Some of them are needed back at the ranches. I'm sendin' Tully back as soon as I don't need him. He's makin' trouble."

"Wot's he doin' now?" Blue Pete wondered if anything had happened since Slick appeared with the recaptured cattle.

"He swears he ain't through yet with Slick Jordan. Slick jus' ran in a nice bunch, an' Tully looked as if he'd like to do some shootin'. I've gotta watch out for him, I can see that. It's a shame, too. Slick an' his boys have done some mighty fine work. Them ten head they brought in jus' now are the pick of the herd. One would think they kept them to the last, jus' to surprise us."

The half-breed had not missed a word. "It's shure a surprise," he muttered.

The tone caught the captain's ear. "What d'yu mean—a surprise?"

Blue Pete shrugged. "I was jes' talkin' to muhself. Them cows Slick run in was near lost. Slick 'n' me we found 'em. That's whar we bin—gittin' 'em back."

Texas nodded understandingly. "I—see. So yu won't tell me any more . . . I don't think yu need to. I can add two and two." His face cleared a little. "Yu know, Pete, something about it makes me feel better. I been puzzled about Slick. Now I know he must be on the square. We don't need to worry about him any more. I'll tell the sergeant."

"Reckon the sergeant's got his own ideas," said Blue Pete. "Nice bunch o' beef, yuh said, eh? Ten, yuh said?"

"Ten o' the best in the herd."

"Hm-m-m!"

"And, Pete, six of them were ours, 3-Bar-Y's."

"Shure, thar was six of ours awright."

He had turned and was riding back with Texas to the chuck-wagon. "No T-Inverted R's, was thar?"

"No, come to think of it, there wasn't."

"I seen thar wasn't. An' yuh said ten, didn' yuh? Yuh said Tully was thar when Slick run the cows in?"

"Yes, and for some reason he looked as if he could slit Slick's throat. . . . Slick jus' grinned all over his face. I thought for a few moments Tully might draw on him."

"Shure, I do' wonder."

"It was a good idea of yours, Pete, to move Tully farther away. And, as I said, I'm sendin' him back to the ranch almost as soon as the drive gets under way."

Blue Pete was silent. He was silent until they reached the chuck-wagon and he turned away along the lakeshore. He was deep in thought, so deep that he scarcely knew where he was going. Ten fat steers, Texas had said—and Texas could count cattle at a glance up to half a hundred!

But Slick and he had brought back fourteen!

He found himself near the camps along the lake. From the Double X someone shouted to him, but he merely waved without looking and passed along.

At the T-Inverted R chuck-wagon several riders were gathered in a group. As Blue Pete neared them, Slick approached from the other side. He was riding in for something to eat, and the others must have seen him coming, for they turned their backs on him. The half-breed watched them more closely, involuntarily drawing the pinto in to a walk

as he watched. If anything mean was in their minds, five to one, he did not propose to let Slick face them alone.

He was conscious of a wild anger surging within, so that his teeth came together and held. The more he had to do with Slick, the more he liked him; and he had never liked Tully Mason and the punchers he had gathered about him. After the rustling the foreman had attempted, he liked him less than ever. His feeling towards Slick was embarrassing, for he had never been able to close his mind against something obviously strange about the handsome puncher, something that warned him to be on guard.

The group of cowboys had tightened, blocking Slick's approach to the chuck-wagon, and now Blue Pete noticed that Tully was among them. Either Slick must ride around them, recognizing their hostility and yielding to it, or he must push through and start something.

And Slick, Blue Pete knew, would not turn aside.

On he came, not altering his pace. The steel-dust broncho stepped lightly along, haughty in manner, defiant as his master, and Slick sat upright in the saddle. It meant that Slick had noticed, that he was on guard, for a cowboy slouches in the saddle, limp, swaying to the movement of his mount.

The solitary rider had almost reached the group. At that moment someone on the opposite side suddenly dug his spurs into his broncho's sides. The others did the same, so that five bronchos surged against Slick and Smarty, Tully nearest to him.

Blue Pete held his breath, and his hand went automatically to his .45. It did not seem possible that either Slick or Smarty could withstand the charge. One against five and unprepared, serious injury to both seemed certain.

But Slick's hand made a quick movement. Instantly Smarty reared. For the shortest of moments he towered over Tully, then came crashing down, his front hoofs pawing wildly.

Had Tully not thrown himself free those flailing hoofs would have crushed his skull, and even as it was a hoof tore into the side of his chaps and crashed into the saddle, tearing away the leather.

Before anyone else could move Blue Pete was among them, his .45 in his hand.

He did not need to use it. The cowboys, self-convicted and ashamed, and not a little frightened, slunk away before him.

Slick was undisturbed. Gently he chided Smarty, as if the broncho were a naughty child. "I'm surprised at you, Smarty, surprised. How dare you do such a thing to our foreman! You might have hurt him. When they want to play you should enter into the spirit of the game and let them break a leg or two for us. Shame on you!"

Tully haltingly clambered to his feet, feeling at one hip and wincing with pain. His lips parted as if to say something, but he saw the half-breed and hesitated.

Slick leaned solicitously towards him. "Are you hurt, Tully?" His voice trembled with exaggerated concern. "It would have been awful if you hadn't been so quick. Smarty is like that sometimes—he does strange things to save himself and me. He's got a mighty quick eye—and a surprising amount of understanding for a horse. It's good you can look after yourself—just like Smarty and me. He misunderstood. He must have thought you tried to harm us. But of course you wouldn't think of anything so mean."

Tully's face was growing redder and redder with fury. He started to speak, choked, and looked helplessly about. But his friends had deserted him.

"You—you did that on purpose," he managed to snarl at last.

Slick did not appear to hear. He shook his head chidingly down on Smarty. "I'll really have to take you out to the woodshed and spank you, you know." He turned to the foreman, and manner and tone changed. "Just the same I've an idea the Mounties wouldn't take kindly to what might have happened—to Smarty and me, I mean. I understand they're real nasty about dirty tricks like that. But I'm glad you jumped in time; otherwise I'd have had to explain. Of course I'd have had Blue Pete for a witness, and he understood what you tried to do. They could scarcely have tried either Smarty or me for manslaughter if you hadn't jumped in time." He looked at the torn chaps and saddle and clacked

his tongue. "Smarty's shoes are so sharp—and heavy. But they'll have other saddles at the ranch for you. They must know they'll need them.

"You know," he continued, tilting his head reminiscently, "I've seen Smarty do that before when someone tried to kill us—and the chap who tried it didn't jump in time. We had a nice big funeral for him, flowers and all the other trimmings. I always do my best for Smarty's victims."

He turned to the half-breed. "I'm glad you were around to see it, Pete. Nice little game, wasn't it? Such a playful lot, the T-inverted R. Like one big family, always fighting among ourselves."

He rode on to the chuck-wagon and dismounted. "Anything to eat, chef? I'm hungry as a dog."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SERGEANT RETURNS

THE RIDE back from the Hat to the roundup would have been pleasant enough for Sergeant Mahon had it not been for the hovering cloud of impending trouble that made this roundup so different from the others. It was a perfect morning. At the inspector's orders he had waited over in the Hat through another day and was thoroughly rested in body if not in mind. Out past the unused exhibition grounds he rode, with the bare prairie stretching away to the Hills with no break but its own unevennesses. It was very early, just four o'clock, and the sun was not yet above the horizon. The air was fresh and cool, as it always is on the prairie when the sun is down.

He had timed his departure to take advantage of the cool hours for the long ride, for in the long drought he had come to dread the sun more and more. His skin felt dry and inflexible, and his eyes sometimes pained.

He was uncomfortable. Worry always made him feel that something was in his stomach that should not be there. There had been a time, away back shortly after joining the Force, when he felt certain that he had chosen the wrong job, but he had been unwilling to acknowledge defeat, and in the end he had conquered the feeling.

He had started under a handicap. Born in England where the sun shone warmly comparatively seldom, he was unprepared for a country where for weeks at a time no cloud softened its brilliance. At first it had made sleep difficult through the short summer hours of darkness, but his skin had hardened, and he had learned the precautions to take. So that now he could sleep at any hour and under almost any condition.

But no amount of hardening made him appreciate less the shade offered by the few cottonwood trees that grew here and

there in the coulees, and the sight of the cool Hills when the sun was up never failed to beckon to him, in spite of the experiences he had been through within those shadows.

By seven o'clock he had reached the Police hut at Turner's Crossing, and there he stopped for something to eat. No one was about, but the hut was always open and stocked for the use of the Mounted Police.

When he had eaten he lay down, not to rest so much as to think. Of course it was the roundup, yet his thoughts carried him nowhere. He knew there was something out there for him to do, but he did not quite know what it was. The inspector had not made things any easier. . . . For one thing he had brought Blue Pete into it, and that was not pleasant to think of. What, the inspector had asked, had the half-breed to do with Slick Jordan? Inspector Barker had never been able to forget the old saying, "Once a rustler always a rustler." As a general rule it was only too true, but Mahon was prepared to stake his job that it did not hold with his half-breed friend. And yet—and yet——

It was those "and yet" that crept into his thoughts now. Ever since Blue Pete had started to work for the Mounted Police he had returned temporarily to rustling. Of course it was over in the Badlands of Montana, and there had been a reason. But——

There it was again—"but." It was always like that. Blue Pete was so unpredictable. He *might* be capable of anything. Anything, that is, except meanness. All his methods were so unconventional that the Mounted Police could never afford to recognize him officially. "Up to his old tricks" was the way the inspector put it, even while he had a feeling that he was not being fair.

His thoughts faltered away to Slick Jordan. There, too, the inspector was not satisfied. And the fact that Blue Pete had happened to ride in on the entertainment on the street that day seemed to make both suspect. Add to that their association during the roundup. It was all confusing; one could scarcely blame the inspector.

He had to admit that Slick, for a newcomer, was a likeable fellow. Nevertheless he was no more satisfied than was

his superior. What was it—besides his education and cleverness—that made him so different from other cowboys? What had brought him and his friends to Canada?

At eight o'clock, with the sun already uncomfortably warm, he mounted Jupiter and set off for Elk Lake. He followed no trail but in his anxiety struck straight across the prairie. After a time, however, he was surprised to find that he had shifted noticeably towards the south. The Hills lay straight before him then, and without reasoning why he kept on. Until he reached the foot of the long slope he refused to admit to himself that something drew him forward—the shade perhaps. But—there was something else, something that refused to permit him to turn aside towards the lake and the roundup.

Within the trees he stopped to think things over, accepting the fact that there was something else, but with no idea at first what it was. Something of the uneasiness that clouded the trip figured in it, drew him into the Hills.

Off on his right the Hills ended abruptly four or five miles away. Before him the wilderness stretched for a dozen miles towards the south. On his left they extended far into Saskatchewan, a huge, deserted tract where so much had happened to him—where so much could still happen.

He advanced into the forest. Jupiter went gladly, comforted by the shade. Mahon removed his stetson and hung it on the saddle-horn while he wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

And then, grimly, with a sense of neglecting his duty, he turned Jupiter towards the west. Now he could comfort his conscience with the thought that he was on his way to the roundup, that he had merely chosen the more comfortable—if longer—route.

And then he discovered that once more he was riding towards the south.

He remembered then that Slick Jordan must have his camp in that direction. He might go on now and find it, just to satisfy his curiosity. He could turn back to the roundup any time.

He rode quietly, a habit he and Jupiter had cultivated in their work—but he knew he was also listening and watching.

He wondered if he might be lucky enough to find the camp before anyone saw him. Two of the cowboys would be there, probably asleep after their night trick. . . . And now he wanted to find the camp, wanted it badly.

It was not long after noon. The sun came straight through the trees, mottling the ground until it dazzled him, so that for minutes he rode with his eyes closed. He had still time to turn away to the roundup, he told himself, and he tried to convince himself that he had it in mind. His job. His job.

His eyes flew open. He had heard nothing, yet he knew that someone was near—watching him—and with none too friendly eyes.

With the slightest of movements his rein hand tightened, and he fixed his mind on the exact location of the rifle behind him in the saddle holster. There in the Hills anyone he met was apt to be no friend of the Mounted Police. Only rustlers used the Hills—and Blue Pete, of course.

He turned his head slightly to the right. There in the deep shadow of a huge spruce a lone rider sat watching him.

It was Slick Jordan. And Slick made no effort to mask his unfriendliness, the questioning in his eyes. But a moment or two after the sergeant faced him he managed to smile, but the smile had no welcome.

"Oh, hello, Slick!" The geniality of it sounded even to himself forced. "This certainly is the place to be on a hot day, isn't it? It's so lovely in here after the prairie."

Smarty came prancing nearer, though Slick had made no perceptible move.

The sergeant, unaccountably embarrassed, eyed the animal admiringly. "Every time I see that broncho I envy you more. Do you make him do all the work of the roundup? How does he stand it?"

Slick's expression lost its unfriendliness and he looked proudly down on the animal. "He's never yet let me down. I trust him—anywhere. He even tells me when strangers are about, long before I would otherwise know it. He's invaluable that way—as well as in other ways. Had you anything particular in mind here, Sergeant?"

"To get out of the sun for a while. I'm on my way back to the roundup. Jupiter and I couldn't resist the shade of the trees here on the way."

"You know the Hills pretty well, don't you?"

"Only Blue Pete knows them better, I believe."

"But this is no place for an honest man." Slick laughed shortly. "It covers even cowboys, doesn't it—and the Mounted Police?"

"It's the dishonest ones who bring us here," returned the sergeant.

Slick said a strange thing then: "Oh, we're *forced* to use the Hills." It was a form of apology. "If we didn't you'd have to stick around the T-Inverted R all the time to prevent murder. We aren't popular there . . . and the feeling is mutual."

"At least you're still alive," laughed the sergeant.

It was no laughing matter to Slick. "Yes, we're alive . . . but not much thanks to the Mounted Police. I'd like to tell you now that if there's trouble we'll merely be protecting ourselves." The serious mood passed, as it always did with Slick, and he laughed. "Oh, well, as you say, we're still alive, we're pulling through . . . and in the meantime we can enjoy the scenery—just like you're doing." He looked about, and the laughter left his voice. "It's a beautiful spot, isn't it? One could spend the rest of his days here and—and forget."

"Is there nothing like this where you come from?" Mahon asked. "I've never been farther south."

Slick regarded him quizzically. "Are you asking me for my post-office address? I haven't one. I've been—almost everywhere. From the south came these wing chaps and the saddle . . . and most of Smarty's fittings. I flit about, from Texas to Montana, and——"

"You carry your quirt on your third finger, not on your wrist," Mahon interrupted.

The smile on Slick's face remained fixed, and he nodded thoughtfully. "I've heard a lot about the Mounties," he said. "I'm glad to observe that it was not overdone. You have your eyes open. My quirt, eh? Who would think that would place me? Yes, I've ridden herd in the south, where they

have to carry the quirt on a finger instead of on the wrist because of the thick brush. But, really, Sergeant, I'm a rolling stone."

"At least you've gathered some moss."

"We won't carry much away with us from Canada, not at the rate we're paid. But it'll last us to the next job, and that's all that matters." He pointed directly to the west. "But I mustn't keep you. You'll be wanting to get to the roundup. Just keep along in that direction and you'll be out of the Hills in a few minutes. It's the only way to escape some rather steep ravines, too, and a few dangerous cliffs. I've come to know this part of the Hills pretty well. I'm going out now to relieve one of the boys. Shall we start?"

Not a muscle of the sergeant's face revealed the fact that he understood, but inwardly he smiled. He knew that part of the Hills better than Slick ever would. He knew, too, that Slick had no intention of letting him find his camp if he could prevent it.

What Slick failed to realize was that his anxiety only betrayed the location of the camp.

CHAPTER XXIV

A THREAT

AS CAPTAIN of the roundup Texas was conscientious as well as capable. In that capacity he forgot that he was merely a cowboy like all those whom he controlled, forgot friendships and dislikes, forgot even that he was foreman of the 3-Bar-Y and that at any other time Blue Pete could give him orders.

It was the usual thing, but with Texas it was carried to the limit, so that the 3-Bar-Y chuck-wagon was little more to him than a place to eat and sleep. The orders he gave there were as captain of the roundup, not as foreman.

The worry of his responsibilities drove him to have another talk with Tully Mason. He had succeeded in separating the two parts of the T-Inverted R outfit, but that was not enough. His next thought, therefore, as he had told Blue Pete, was to send Tully farther afield, to station his men along the line of the trail to Dunmore Junction to prevent the discards from mingling with the beef steers on the drive.

The plan looked all right, until it threatened once more to bring Slick and Tully together, and Texas quickly saw that Tully was looking forward to it.

Texas had heard of the incident that day at the T-Inverted R chuck-wagon; he had heard two versions of it, the first from Tully's men, the second from a rider for the Double X who had come straight to him to report. To find out the truth he sought out Slick.

At first Slick had little to say. He was content to forget the whole affair. "It wasn't anything for you to worry about," he declared. "The broncs got rambunctious, that's all. Everyone's been on edge, the broncs as well as the punchers."

"I know what he tried to do to yu," said Texas.

"I can't seem to remember much about that," Slick laughed. "What I remember is the way Tully looked as he tumbled from the saddle and lay scowling up at the world in general. He didn't know whether to start shooting or to call for a doctor. His hip was hurt, you know. Just reviewing that scene is going to make my trick tonight pleasantly short. You know how a foreman must feel when such a thing happens to him before the eyes of his friends. . . . Then imagine how he must have felt when it happened before *my* eyes. I'm satisfied."

"I asked yu exactly what happened," Texas persisted.

"Oh, you've heard. My side of the story is prejudiced, of course, but his bronc jumped at Smarty and me, and Smarty wasn't having any of it. That was really all there was to it."

"Yu have Smarty trained to almost anythin', haven't yu?"

"Well, he and I have had to look after ourselves. Smarty does his own thinking. That's why he's so easy to train."

"In other words yu made him do what he did."

Texas's persistence annoyed Slick, and his face darkened. "Suppose I did. Am I not justified in taking any means to avoid serious injury—either to myself or to Smarty? We've all learned to do that, haven't we? With cattle one has to . . . and Tully is a few grades lower than a scalawag. Of course he's sore, physically and mentally, but the roundup'll soon be over. We can surely keep out of each other's way that long. At any rate I'm not worrying—and I'll not invite trouble."

Defeated, yet in a way somewhat more at ease, Texas turned to Tully. To reach him he had to ride to the northwest. He had no idea what he could do, but personal antagonisms were a threat he had to meet, and there were still two or three days of the roundup.

He found Tully lying in the thin shade of a cottonwood tree in a coulee that offered no excuse for any tree to exist. No one else was in sight, and Texas came on him before he could move. Tully was rubbing his thigh.

Texas rode down to him. He did not dismount. "Yu won't have much more to do, Tully," he said, "so yu'll be free to return to the ranch, perhaps tomorrow, certainly the next

day. The discards seem to be pretty well out of the way, so that they aren't likely to give us much trouble. The Double X will probably take your place farther along the drive.

Tully started to rise, and his face twisted with pain. A low oath burst from him.

"Hurt yourself," Texas asked innocently.

"Yu know damn' well how I was hurt," the foreman grated. "It was that damn' Yank."

"Yu mean Slick Jordan? I was just talkin' to him. Yes, I heard somethin' happened, but Slick didn't wanta talk about it."

"He wouldn't. That damn' trick bronc of his, it jumped into mine. I had to throw myself from the saddle or I'd 'a' been killed."

"That isn't quite the way I heard it," said Texas shortly. "I was told your bronc was cuttin' up——"

"It was restless, like all the broncs in this roundup. That's all. That bronc of his didn' need to jump an' strike at me. It mighta killed me."

"It probably thought you tried to kill it. Yu were on the big bay, weren't yu? If it had hit Slick there'd 'a' been bones broken."

"Well, it wasn't my fault," Tully growled. He cursed. "Yu got Slick's story, that's what."

"I got several stories. Slick's bronc reared——"

"That's what I said: it reared an' struck at me." He climbed stiffly into the saddle. "That's all I gotta say." He glared savagely at Texas. "But yu can tell Jordan he ain't goin' to get away with it, not by a long shot he ain't. I'm not through with him yet." He settled cautiously in the saddle. "Besides, there's Pal; he knows where Pal is."

"Is that so? I was wonderin' myself where Pal was. I ain't seen him around since the first day. What happened?"

"You ask Slick Jordan . . . I'm goin' to ask him myself, an' there'll be an answer or there'll be trouble."

"But I don't know what yu're talkin' about. What in the world has Slick to do with Pal?"

"I said ask him," Tully shouted angrily and started away.

In a blaze of sudden anger Texas spurred to his side. "Tully," he warned, "all I'm concerned with is that there won't be no trouble to delay the roundup. I'm goin' to see there isn't. D'you hear?"

Tully scowled. "I'll wait till the roundup's over—if I don't find he's skippin' out first. That's all I'll say."

There was nothing more to be done, but Texas longed for the sergeant's return.

CHAPTER XXV

SLICK PROMISES

WORRIES piled on worries. Again there were carried to Texas stories of disturbances in the dark of night about the herds, yet no one had anything definite about it. He tried to convince himself that the wolves had become bold with the extended roundup, but he knew that could not be. He even tried to think it might be only the taut nerves of the cowboys. There was ample reason for nerves, if only from the open feud everyone knew existed.

He knew there was more than that.

That night something happened to one of the beef herds that almost led to a stampede. Fortunately he had assigned an unusually large number of punchers to guard the herd or it could not have been held. Another group farther south spoke of strange movement beyond them, working back towards the Hills. It was all very confusing.

The seriousness of a stampede at such a time weighed on Texas. Not only would it delay the roundup until the cattle could once more be rounded up and cut, but in the stampede the animals would lose weight and in some cases probably be unfit to ship.

He felt helpless about it, for the stories were too vague to furnish any idea what he could do. He thought of Slick. Slick had no nerves, and Texas had a feeling that he was too independent to lie. The new cowboy was cool and sane, and even his prejudices and dislikes were not likely to colour his judgment or even his statements. That movement reported towards the south would be somewhere near his section.

Accordingly when he had snatched a bite at the chuck-wagon Texas rode away to the south. Only the cooks and the night-herds were in the camps, and they paid little atten-

tion to him. But as he passed the end of the lake and came out not far from the long slope to the Hills he was conscious of being watched. For a time he fought it off, and when it persisted he stiffened against it. But he could not help wondering—could not convince himself that it was unimportant.

Yielding to the urge, he tried to place the eyes. They were, he decided, somewhere up there along the edge of the forest, and he swung his head slowly towards the point.

Was that movement there among the trees? He could not be certain. He realized that his own nerves were on edge and ready to imagine things. Even if someone was there, how did it concern him? Perhaps nothing more than some slinking animal, a wolf or a coyote. Yet he knew they were human eyes.

He rode on, the uneasy feeling increasing. But after a time his attention concentrated on two riders far away to the southeast. They were riding swiftly eastward in pursuit of three steers that must have broken away from one of the herds. Once they stopped and appeared to look back towards the Hills.

Drawing in, he watched. The pair had started on again and were rounding the cattle up and turning them back to the west and north, driving them to where they could be picked up by other outfits. They were, he knew, two of Slick's boys, for it was definitely in their section, and no herd of theirs was in sight.

He urged his broncho forward but presently pulled in again and waited. He saw the riders drive the steers well to the north and leave them, then turn back to their own section. He knew they had seen him, but at what moment he could not decide.

Suddenly the sound of a fast-moving broncho reached him from behind and he swung nervously about. Slick was coming swiftly down the slope from the Hills.

Texas recalled those watching eyes, and he greeted the cowboy with a frown, though he could not understand why he felt as he did. Slick had a right to be there; he was merely coming now to relieve one of his friends. Then he noticed the

binoculars hanging from Slick's shoulder. And the flap of the case was open, the strap hanging loose. Those glasses had been recently in use.

Slick noticed where Texas's attention was fixed, and he tapped the case. "The captain of a roundup should carry something like this. It would save a lot of riding. I was keeping an eye on the boys. I've been a little slow in taking my trick."

Something in his manner made the explanation sound forced, and Texas's frown deepened. But he turned his face away and looked about on the empty prairie.

"You've got this end cleared up. I don't think there's anythin' more for yu here. The Double X can take over all this part with their own. I can use yu better on the drive. We're days late as it is, an' I'm goin' to get the blame. Yu can start——"

"Start nothing." Slick shook his head with determination. "We're through. We're not going to help in the drive. We weren't hired for that, and you won't need us. We've done more than our share and we're ready to quit." His lips twisted. "Surely you wouldn't put Jim Allen to any unnecessary expense."

Texas faced him scornfully. "If you're scared o' Tully Mason——"

Slick flushed, then he laughed easily. "It won't work, Texas. You know we're not afraid of Tully—or of anyone else. You should welcome a move that would put an end to our feud. I don't mind confessing that your suggestion to run us up against Tully once more is tempting, because I'd like to settle with him before I go."

"I forgot to say," Texas told him, "that Tully and his men are goin' back to the ranch right away. Yu wouldn't meet 'em. . . . Besides, Sergeant Mahon'll be back," he added significantly.

"The sergeant is back now," Slick informed him. "He's around somewhere. Just the same I'm kind of glad to get away without more trouble, because we'd be sure to get the blame, and I'm uncertain what those Mounties might do to us. Somehow I have a shrinking feeling of guilt every time

I see the uniform, and I hate feeling like a rogue. That's what comes of living a spotless life."

Texas could afford to smile at last, for his trouble appeared to be over. "Yu'll find the Mounties fair," he said.

"But with my past!" Slick made a grimace.

"It's your present that matters."

Slick's smile faded slowly, and he stared at Texas for a long moment in silence. "Well, that's all," he said. "I don't suppose your laws could make us work longer than we wished. We'll stick to the end of the roundup; that's what we promised. If you need help, here's Blue Pete." He pointed over Texas's shoulder. "He can do the work of half a dozen ordinary punchers. I've punched with him and I know. He seems to have nothing to do; everywhere I go I meet him. He gets on my nerves sometimes. Ah, and here comes the sergeant. Quite a gathering. Now all the cards are on the table—and the players are seated." He laughed shortly.

Blue Pete rode up to them. He looked inquiringly from one to the other.

Slick greeted him with a lazy laugh. "You've turned up like the proverbial penny, Pete—though probably you're not a bad one. In fact you're always turning up—at the most unexpected times and places. You're hard on a guilty conscience. You're as ubiquitous as—as a coyote."

The half-breed had never heard the word before, and it was evident from his puzzled expression.

Slick smiled his most attractive smile. "Oh, never mind. I talk too much. I'm merely welcoming you. I like to see you around—when I *know* you're around." He tilted his head. "Strange how you do turn up, though, and always when trouble threatens."

Blue Pete understood that. "Shure, that's wot Mira says. She says I kin never stay away from trouble."

"I have a great admiration for Mira—whoever she is," said Slick.

"Mira's my wife."

Slick removed his hat and bowed. "Then I bow to her. I compliment her on choosing a mate—who knows his job."

Blue Pete was uneasy under the banter and Slick continued:

"I'm glad you came when you did. I need a witness. I've resigned—for the boys, I mean. For us the roundup is over. We're not going to be in the drive to the train."

The sergeant had joined them as he talked, and Slick turned to him. "I was telling Texas we're through, Sergeant. Nothing to prevent it, is there?"

"How long did you sign on for?" asked the sergeant.

"We didn't sign anything, but we said we'd punch through the roundup. It's just over; the drive starts tomorrow, I believe."

"Does Texas need you?"

"He says he does. He really doesn't. Jim Allen will be glad to save the money. I think you know him. There are more punchers than are needed for the drive."

"I suppose you're free to do as you like," Mahon decided.

"Yuh mean yuh're gittin' out?" Blue Pete inquired.

Slick hesitated. "I don't know that we're skipping away immediately. We're very comfortable up there in the Hills. The boys might like a few days' rest. After the jug-heads they got for the roundup they need a rest." He turned and raised his eyes to the forest on the heights. "We've come to love the Hills."

"Few of us do," said the sergeant. "Only Blue Pete here. Everyone else avoids them."

"But not the Mounties. You've told me."

"We enter them as little as we can. There's something about them——"

"Like the shade?" There was a twinkle in Slick's eyes.

Mahon noticed the twinkle. "Sometimes the shade is inviting," he confessed. "I'm always given whatever work there is to do in the Hills, and my experiences don't make them any more attractive. . . . Naturally we have to know all that goes on in them."

"All?"

"All we can find out."

"Particularly when strangers are concerned," Slick suggested, laughing again.

"The strangers we usually find in the Hills are rustlers. Naturally they aren't popular in a cow-country."

"So I've heard. . . . I suppose they usually run over from the Badlands."

"Blue Pete here knows more about the Badlands than I do," said the sergeant. For some reason he was growing irritated. He could not be sure why Slick persisted in the conversation.

Blue Pete nodded. "Shure. I know 'em. Them ranchers over thar, they git into rustlin' as part o' the ranchin' game—the Circle K, an' the J-Cross-J——"

"And the 4L, and the Fish-Hook, and the Block M, and the Flying R——" Slick stopped abruptly, looking slightly embarrassed. "Oh, I know something about them all—though probably not as much as you do, Pete."

Sergeant Mahon caught the sly glance he threw at the half-breed. "We know Blue Pete rather well in these parts," he said.

There was a shortness about it that did not escape Slick. "Meaning that by contrast you know nothing about *us*. Well, you won't need to worry about that because we're flitting very soon. Just a bit of rest perhaps and we'll be packing our freight. You won't need to know our pedigree or the brand of chewing gum we prefer." He nodded in a friendly way. "I must admit you've treated us mighty decently, Sergeant."

"I don't recall treating you in any definite way. As long as you observe our laws——"

"At least you haven't attempted to intrude on our privacy—so far as I know—and that means a lot."

"How long do you expect to remain?" the sergeant asked. "The inspector would wish to know that."

"Oh, come now, Sergeant. You're not trying to kick us out before we've had a short rest, are you? We've done our job rather well, and we've done no one any wrong—as yet. Only one thing: I'd like to pay Medicine Hat one more visit before we leave, a farewell appearance, so to speak. They seemed to like us there; it'll be nice to leave with that memory of the country. I could put on another show for them. Smarty

hasn't half done his tricks. Some day I may even have him talking. I wouldn't be surprised to hear him wish me good morning any day now."

As if the broncho knew what was said he arched his neck and pranced a little.

Slick smiled fondly down on him. "One thing I'm going to leave unfinished: I never have convinced Blue Pete that Smarty is faster than the pinto—faster and more enduring."

"You should come over for the race around the city," Mahon suggested. "Whiskers has beaten them all. It's six miles and more."

"I've heard of that race. It would be a real one."

"It always is."

Texas had scarcely listened. He was conscious of a great relief. With Slick out of the way—with Sergeant Mahon on hand, too—the feud with Tully Mason was like a dream. "We can get along without you if we have to," he said. "But you'll have to go in to the ranch to collect your pay."

Slick shrugged and spread his hands. "The pay? Is it worth it? Pay is a misnomer for the work done. But we've been paid well enough in excitement—and in the beautiful setting for our camp. Really it's been like a holiday. . . . I may send one of the boys to collect—or again I may not bother." He grinned. "I'd better not go myself for fear of running into Tully—without you to keep us from scratching faces, Texas. When it was over I mightn't be fast enough to get across the Border."

He beckoned to Buzz and Dave and started away. In a moment he was back, sweeping off his big stetson. "I bow to you all, a rather pleasant group of companions. I hope you won't mind my telling you that among you you've saved Tully Mason's life. Across the Border—well, things would have been different. Jim Allen needs him. We'll toddle along now."

And as he rode away, Smarty prancing as if he knew admiring eyes followed him, he looked back over his shoulder, and waved.

Behind him were three silent men, three who watched and were thoughtful. Their thoughts were different, and each seemed to be aware of it for no one spoke. Texas was frankly relieved—but confused. Sergeant Mahon was uneasy, as with an uncompleted task. On Blue Pete's face a curious smile flickered for a moment and was gone.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SERGEANT EXPLORES

THE UNEASINESS Mahon felt was doubly worrying. He felt that he had neglected something, and at the same time he wondered if his uneasiness about Slick was not doing him an injustice. There was added also the fear that Tully Mason, freed from the roundup, might take pains to hunt Slick out and settle things between them. He would not make the hunt alone either.

Slick would not tempt trouble, but equally certain was it that he would not deliberately evade it. Yet what was there to do about it?

In his anxiety Mahon talked it over with Corporal Simmons, but the corporal had been on duty far to the north and, although he had heard stories, he was reluctant to express an opinion from the information he had.

"Tully has got more than he bargained for at every turn," he said. "It was coming to him, so I don't see why we need concern ourselves for his protection. No one was hurt—except Tully's feelings, from what I can learn. I'll bet he's sore."

Mahon brooded over it. "That's the danger. He won't forget; he can't afford to. His failures were within sight of his friends, and that's a blow he can't take. Besides, there's that broncho of his. Pal was like a son to him. No one wants to talk about Pal, so I can't discover what happened to him."

Simmons shook his head gloomily. "I never thought of that. That's the serious part, I should say. If Pal is missing, and if Tully blames Slick for it, watch out. . . . Why don't you talk it over with Blue Pete? I'll bet he knows all the turns and twists. Nothing like that can go on around the Hills without his knowledge. I'll bet he's been in on every phase of it."

"Do you have any reason for saying that?" Mahon inquired hopefully, yet fearfully.

Simmons smiled. "I see you have the same thought. No, I haven't heard his name connected with any part of it, but you and I know him better than the rest. I'm only saying what I'd do."

Mahon did it—he went in search of the half-breed.

To find him, he discovered, had become suddenly difficult, so that it was evident Blue Pete was avoiding him. In despair Mahon went to talk it over with Mira.

Blue Pete was there, and it did not take long to discover that he did not wish to talk. Only when Mahon threw a sudden question at him did the half-breed open his mind.

"What about Tully's broncho, Pal?" was the question. "Do you know anything about it?"

Blue Pete would not look at his friend. "I dunno. Tully ain't ridin' him sence the very fust."

"But if he had him he'd certainly be using him. You know that. You know he always has Pal with him. What about it, Pete?"

"Why donchu ast Tully? I ain't seen him. . . . Mebbe he do' wanta work him in the roundup. It's hard on a bronc, an' the T-Inverted R has lots o' broncs they can use. Pal's a dandy cuttin' hoss, too good to face them scalawags we got in this roundup. Never seen such a wild bunch before."

Mahon knew he was not being frank. "You know something has happened to Pal, and you know Tully doesn't know where he is. That's one thing that keeps him in such a furious temper. Someone must find that broncho, and only Tully and I would be interested enough to look for it. Will you help, Pete?"

Blue Pete shook his head. "He's Tully's bronc. I ain't goin' outa my way to do nothin' for Tully Mason . . . an' *you* bes' keep outa it too."

"Do you think Slick is in at any point?"

"Why donchu ast Slick?"

Mahon gave it up. But the fact that Blue Pete concealed something from him added to his uneasiness.

The drive to the station had already started, and some of the chuck-wagons had moved from the lake to head it. The operation would take four days, the loading another two or

three. Ten miles a day was the limit for the herd, in order to retain their weight. Stops would be pre-arranged, with the chuck-wagons waiting to serve meals and to establish the night-herding. Texas had placed the 3-Bar-Y boys "on drag," that is, at the rear of the drive. He himself would have to be everywhere, and he knew he could trust his own outfit.

Tully Mason had not yet gone, and Mahon knew where to find him. So as not to interfere with the drive he rode far to the west, then turned northward, passing several riders "on swing" (at the sides of the herd) who waved to him. With the end of the roundup in sight the punchers were in high spirits. In a few days now they would be in Medicine Hat, drowning the memories of the strenuous period of the roundup. A glorious drunk—with profit to no one but the hotel keepers. But the punchers would have a new memory.

Early in the afternoon Mahon came on the T-Inverted R outfit. Their task was merely to wait where they were until the herd had passed, then they were free to return to the home ranch. At first Tully paid no attention to him. He was in a furious mood, more immediately because the discards had been giving trouble, and the broncho he happened to ride at the time was untrained and stupid.

Mahon watched him laboriously throw a small bunch back to the west, swearing and muttering, before riding up to him.

"That," he remarked, "is the sort of job you should have Pal for."

Tully swung about and scowled at him. "I'll break this brute's neck if he doesn't behave." He jerked on the reins and raked the animal's sides with his spurs.

"At least that'll break his skin," said Mahon shortly. "Better go a little easier on the rough stuff, Tully. Allen won't be too well pleased to see those tears."

Tully opened his lips as if to reply but thought better of it and rode on.

The sergeant kept pace with him. "How is it you aren't using Pal in the roundup?" he asked.

"That's my business," snapped the foreman.

"Of course. I was merely thinking of you and the roundup. Of Pal, too, since I know he won't feel happy about being left out of it. I didn't think you were ever separated."

"That's Pal's business and mine."

Mahon laughed. "I was wondering, that's all."

"I know where Pal is," Tully muttered. "I'm glad he ain't in this mess—an' it'll be worse before it's over."

"It *has* been a mess," Mahon agreed. "I wonder why."

"Why donchu ask Texas? Never knew him handle a roundup right."

"But what's the trouble? You're an old puncher; you should know."

Tully swallowed the words that wanted to pour from him, but at last they forced their way out: "Look at the way Tex has been lettin' that Slick Jordan get away with things—do jus' what he likes."

"Has he been doing that? I thought Slick and his friends had done a rather difficult job well—with only four of them and only three of them paid for it."

"All Slick's good for is dollin' up an' playin' that thingumabob."

"I saw him doing some pretty work with the cows. And no one has more reason to appreciate that than you. He had a difficult corner there near the Hills, but it happened to suit him because he made his camp there. No one made it pleasant for him around the T-Inverted R chuck-wagon."

"It was his own fault," snapped Tully.

"Well, it's over now."

"It's over for me, anyway. We're pullin' out tonight, an' none too soon for me."

"Slick has pulled out already."

Tully straightened in the saddle and glowered at him. "Yu mean he—he's gone?"

"No, not yet, but he and his boys have stopped work on the roundup. They were hired for that part only, and Texas says he can finish the drive without them. I'm not even certain they'll take the trouble to collect what Jim Allen owes them. . . . I think they're wise quitting now. It hasn't been pleasant for them."

Tully did not seem to hear. "Yu sure they're not gone?"

Suddenly Mahon wished he could say they were gone. "They may take a few days' rest in the Hills—or a day or two in the Hat. At least they'll worry no one any longer. I'm quite sure of that." He studied Tully's angry face. "If there's trouble it won't be started by Slick, so it won't be difficult to trace it."

Only one thought, however, remained in the foreman's mind. "They're still campin' in the Hills?"

"They're out of everyone's way there, and"—Mahon leaned towards Tully—"if there's trouble it'll be forced upon them."

"Anyone that touches Pal," grated Tully, "has to reckon with me, Mounties or no Mounties."

"And anyone who starts trouble," warned the sergeant, "has to reckon with me. And I think I have the last word."

One thing the interview had told Mahon was that Tully blamed Slick for the disappearance of Pal, and he rode thoughtfully towards the south with new plans forming in his mind. On the way he met Texas riding nervously about, but they merely waved and passed without speaking.

In a coulee he waited an hour, giving the herd time to get out of sight, then he made straight for the Hills. His knowledge of the lay of the land enabled him to keep out of sight most of the time, but now and then that was impossible. The day was well advanced, but he did not hurry.

When darkness fell he turned directly up the slope towards the trees.

Concealed there, he dismounted, hobbled Jupiter, turned him loose, and lay down to sleep. He knew that end of the Hills rather well, but he would not risk penetrating the forest farther until he could see his way. Besides, there was nothing to learn in the darkness, and he had no wish to stumble on anything for which he was unprepared.

Three hours of sleep, and Jupiter nosed him awake. The nights were getting longer, so that it was still dark, and he sat up and tried to make his plan more definite. That there was something there in the Hills that he should know he felt certain, as well as that he should know it without delay. He knew, too, that in some way it concerned Slick Jordan.

It was a strange feeling he had about Slick. He liked the fellow, yet he did not trust him. There was much about him that was attractive. He was no ordinary cowboy, nor as a mere drifter did he fit into the picture one had of him. He had travelled widely in the United States, and in the course of his wanderings he must have faced many dangers and difficulties. That was proven by his self-assurance and fearlessness, his unconcern in the face of danger. He never seemed to lose his cheerfulness. But his self-reliance made him provocative. He had come through the Badlands and appeared to know quite a bit about them. The Badlands were notoriously lawless where cattle were concerned.

He tried to dissociate Slick with that lawlessness. It wasn't fair, with the little he knew of him, but the Mounted Police had always to be suspicious until they knew. Any newcomer had the right to claim to be what he appeared to be until something different was proven. But with the Mounted Police it had to be proven that he was what he claimed to be.

He munched at the food he had brought, waiting for the sun to rise. At last it was light enough and he mounted Jupiter. There in the Hills Jupiter had a different rôle to play and he knew it. No prancing, no light-hearted swagger there. The broncho had a lot of horse-sense, which made him a good Police horse. He knew that conditions were different in the Hills. His experiences had taught him that danger lurked there in every shadow, and to avoid or escape it was his duty. And so he always moved cautiously, making as little noise as possible. Like his rider he was always looking for danger, and it was wise to see it before it saw him.

For a time Mahon let him have his head. As yet direction was more or less indefinite in the plan he had formed. So long as it tended to the south and west he was content, for he had skirted the slope far to the east on the north side of the Hills before entering the forest.

In a more or less general way he knew where Slick's camp must be located—at least where it was the day before yesterday. That did not satisfy him, however, for he had a feeling that Slick would not remain long in one spot.

The sun climbed. During the early hours he had moved in unbroken shadow; now the sun found chinks in the foliage and mottled the ground in the dazzling way it had. He would have liked to close his eyes against it, but he remembered that he had something too serious in mind for that. Slick Jordan was there, and Slick was touchy where his privacy was concerned.

And so he kept his eyes determinedly open—so that he noticed when Jupiter's ears shot forward and remained fixed. Mahon leaned from the saddle to examine the ground. Yes, a horse had passed that way—not today but very recently.

He stopped and looked about to locate himself. He judged that he must still be half a dozen miles from the western end of the Hills and at least three miles from where he had entered. Slick's camp, as he remembered it, would be some miles farther west and south.

Suddenly he thought of Blue Pete. But the track he had seen was not made by the pinto. He dismounted and examined it more closely, and he wished he had the half-breed's cleverness for reading and following a trail. He tried to follow it on foot, Jupiter keeping at his shoulder. Then the tracks vanished. Round and round he went, but he could find nothing more.

Disappointed and a little ashamed, he mounted and rode straight forward, directing himself by the shadows. But no more tracks did he find.

It was Jupiter again who warned him. Though Mahon could see nothing to justify it, the broncho's manner definitely located something there in the deeper shadows ahead, and he stopped, staring into the shadows and listening.

Everything appeared as it should be, but Jupiter continued to warn him. Accordingly he dismounted and led the broncho into a cluster of trees and tied him. Cautiously he crept through the other side and looked about. Still he saw nothing but the forest and the mottled shadows. But he was not satisfied, and he advanced slowly in the direction where Jupiter had seemed to sense something. He reached the bank of a ravine and looked down into it.

At first it appeared not unlike a score of ravines he had

seen in the Hills, but Jupiter never made a mistake, and he slid behind a bush and lay down where he could keep the hollow in sight.

It was a beautiful spot. A tiny stream gurgled through it, with a thick growth of grass along its banks. Against the western bank the sun cast dazzling spots of light, and he let his eyes range farther to the deeper shadows at the other end of the ravine. There they stopped.

A hobbled broncho was there, lazily nibbling at the grass. Once it raised its head and yawned, baring its teeth straight towards Mahon.

"Wal," drawled a familiar voice almost at his elbow, "yuh found him at last. Shure, that's Pal."

CHAPTER XXVII

MAHON FINDS THE CAMP

SO FAR as the presence of the half-breed was concerned Mahon was only mildly surprised. One was apt to meet him anywhere at any time in the Hills. What did surprise him was that he was so little surprised at finding Tully Mason's lost broncho. It excited but did not surprise him, and he knew then that he had had something like that in his mind all the time. Someone had taken Pal away back at the first day of the roundup. What was more important was that somehow Pal fitted into his curiosity concerning Slick Jordan.

"So you, too, were looking for him, Pete?" he asked.

"Shure, on'y I found him two-three days ago. I cуда found him sooner on'y Slick wanted to be alone this end o' the Hills."

"Who's looking after him? He's hobbled."

Blue Pete shrugged. "Do' need no lookin' after, not in that nice little place. Didn' needta hobble him even. He ain't bin so well off in all his life before."

"Who brought him here?"

"Yuh got one guess—an' I won't say ef yuh're right."

"But that's horse-stealing."

The half-breed removed his dirty grey stetson and scratched at his stiff black hair. "Mebbe," he agreed reluctantly, "the way the Mounties 'ud look at it. Don' look like it to me."

"At least it's certain Tully didn't put him here; he doesn't know where he is."

"Tully knows whar he was las' time he seen him, but he dassent tell yuh 'bout that. Yuh cudn' charge nobody 'th stealin' 'thout Tully done some talkin', an' he dassent do that. No, Sergeant, yuh bes' drop it right here. Yuh cudn' prove nothin. Anyways," he added with a grin, "yuh cudn' blame Pal fer tryin' to git away from Tully Mason. Mebbe he run away."

"And hobbled himself, I suppose?"

Blue Pete appeared to consider that as a possibility. "Ef I'd found Pal wanderin' I'd 'a' hobbled him to keep him from bein' lost. Hobblin' ain't stealin'. No, sir, Sergeant. Ef yuh butted in here yuh'd jes' git things mixed up wuss 'n they are. They look bad 'nuff 'thout that." He dropped to the ground beside his friend. "Yuh got Jupiter hid?"

"Yes, back there in those trees."

"Whiskers heard yuh comin'. Anyways, I sorta 'spected yuh, so I bin hangin' around. I seen yuh was thinkin' things over."

Mahon was thinking things over now. "Do you think it's Pal that's keeping him here?"

"Who? Slick Jordan?"

"Yes."

Blue Pete shook his head. "Slick cuda got Pal 'cross the Border any time he liked."

"You mean that's not all he's here for?"

"I ain't guessin' at nothin'." He added, "I'm sarchin'."

Mahon frowned at him. He was annoyed. Once more his friend knew or suspected something but would not speak of it. "I suppose," he said, "I should take Pal out with me now."

"But mebbe he ain't lost. An' ef he ain't, somebody's comin' fer him. I bet Tully didn' say he was lost."

"Indirectly he did—yesterday." He eyed the half-breed reprovingly. "Neither did you, though you knew Pal was gone—and you know how and why. You know a lot you won't tell me."

"'Tain't none o' my business," Blue Pete explained apologetically. "I'm keepin' outa it . . . long's I kin. An' I don't see why you gotta butt in ef Tully ain't ast yuh to."

"Are you trying to protect Slick Jordan?" Mahon asked suddenly.

"Slick do' need no pertectin'. He kin look after himself. An' ef Tully didn' ast yuh——"

"He didn't. He practically told me to mind my own business."

"I ain't bin that plain," grinned Blue Pete. "Tully didn' ast nothin' 'cause he's lookin' fer a chance to do suthin'

dirty to Slick. He'd rather lose Pal than a chance to get even. Ef I was a Mountie I reckon I'd jes' leave Pal whar he is an' not let on I knew anythin' 'bout him."

"But if he's taken away——"

"Pal won't be stole by nobody," Blue Pete promised.

They sat for a time watching the broncho feeding. Pal had never before seen grass like it, and he was evidently eating long past feeling hungry for it. Lazily he grazed along, turned once and came towards them. And suddenly he became aware of them, and he raised his head and whinnied. From behind the two men Jupiter whinnied a low reply.

Mahon turned and frowned towards his broncho. "I'm quite sure Whiskers won't answer. Jupiter ought to know better."

"Shure she won't. She ain't givin' nothin' 'way, not here in the Hills." The half-breed picked up a twig and turned it over and over in his large hands. "Yuh come here to find out more'n this 'bout Slick, didn' yuh? Shure I knew yuh wud. I seen yuh tryin' to git into the Hills 'thout nobody seein' yuh. Yuh ain't bin shure 'bout Slick." He pointed at Tully's broncho. "An' yuh ain't found out nothin' by that. Nothin' that matters, I mean. I kin tell yuh Slick ain't stealin' Pal, ef that's any use to yuh. Leastwise he won't steal him. It's jes' a game he's played Tully fer suthin' Tully tried on him. It didn' work—not the way Tully wanted it."

"Then why is Slick hanging around still?"

Blue Pete shrugged. "That's wot yuh come to find out, ain't it? . . . An' yuh're goin' to find out 'fore yuh're through, ainju?"

"Certainly—if I can." The sergeant clambered to his feet and wiped the pine needles from his riding breeches. "What's more, I'm going to try to find out right now. I think I know where his camp is—or close to it. I'm going to pay him a visit."

"Want me to come 'long?"

"If you like."

The half-breed rose. "I kin save yuh lots o' time."

"I wouldn't be surprised. I don't expect Slick remains long in the same place."

Blue Pete thrust two fingers between his lips and whistled,

and Whiskers came trotting up to him. Her greeting to Mahon was a playful nip at his arm as she passed, and he patted her nose for a moment.

"Aren't you afraid he'll hear that?" Mahon inquired anxiously.

"Naw. You'll see."

"I think," said Mahon, "I can find my way to where his camp was the day before yesterday."

Blue Pete fell in behind him, smiling at the stiff back of his friend. "Awright, go ahead."

After a time Mahon stopped and looked about. "The camp was somewhere around here. Slick was careful to lead me off in that direction—away from the camp, I knew. Let's look over here."

Blue Pete rode up beside him. "Yuh done durn well, Sergeant. I didn' think yuh'd hit it so near."

They came out on a height. Below them was another of the hundreds of pleasant little depressions that dotted the Cypress Hills. On the bank of the stream below them were the ashes of many recent fires.

But there was nothing else.

The lifelessness of the scene was so apparent that Mahon rode boldly down and examined the ashes. "There was a fire here yesterday," he said, "or the day before."

"Shure. An' Slick knew yuh'd hev a purty good idea whar the camp was, so he moved."

Mahon frowned down on the dead ashes. "You don't think he's gone for good, do you?"

"Think it skeered him like that fer yuh to know?" Blue Pete shook his head. "No, he said he wasn' goin' right away, so he ain't gone."

"You have greater faith in his word than I have. I wouldn't trust him——"

"Me neither—'ceptin' he ain't skipped out."

"Then you know where he is?"

"I kin find out. I'll take yuh thar." He dismounted and walked along the edge of the ravine. "'Tain't so easy," he grumbled after a time. "They bin comin' an' goin' a lot. Let's go 'tother side."

They crossed the ravine, and almost right away the half-breed picked up the trail.

"They went off this way. Thar ain't nothin' now to keep 'em so near this end o' the Hills, now the roundup's over, an' Slick ain't lookin' to let anybody ride in on him."

He led the way towards the east, keeping his eyes on the ground. "I'll foller it," he said. "You keep yer eyes all round."

After a time the sergeant said, "But this is getting away east. He wouldn't——" He stopped and pointed excitedly to the ground. "There've been cattle here."

"Shure. I seen 'em long ago. Lots o' the cows made for the Hills when they was chased, to git outa the roundup. Wait a bit." He stopped and examined the ground more closely. "Reckon we ain't much further to go. Bes' go sorta keeful here . . . an' we'll leave the bronchos."

They dismounted, leaving the bronchos in a thicket, and the sergeant fell in behind his friend. The latter went forward without hesitation, though Mahon could make out little of the trail he followed. Another ravine blocked their way, and the half-breed stopped and signalled to Mahon to wait. Cautiously he went forward alone.

At the edge of the bank he turned and beckoned, and Mahon hurried to him.

Close to the cliff beneath them a lazy line of thin smoke rose. It vanished before it reached their level. Between the fire and the cliff a bed of spruce boughs was spread, fresh spruce that scarcely showed use.

But there was no sign of life.

Mahon studied his companion's face without speaking.

"Oh, thar ain't nobody about," said the half-breed. "I'll go down an' take a look. Keep on the watch up here."

He slid down the bank and disappeared under the cliff. In a few moments he came out to the fire and beckoned.

The sergeant descended the slope. He was disappointed and not a little depressed. A sense of helplessness and defeat made him wonder where he had neglected something. There was something uncanny about it all. Within a very few hours Slick and his friends had been there, and now they had gone only in

time to escape questioning. It was as if they knew all the time what Mahon had in mind, had watched him try to carry his plan through. It was so like Slick.

He asked himself why the strange cowboys should want to avoid him. As yet he knew nothing against them, was rather prepossessed in their favour. So far as he knew there was nothing to justify flight.

And so he stood over the dying embers, shaking his head gloomily. "They're gone for good this time," he said, clacking his lips in disgust. "Now we'll never know about them. I should have taken them into the Hat when I had them. It isn't right to let them escape when we know so little about them. We should have made them explain themselves." He realized how ridiculous it was and laughed wryly.

Blue Pete laughed with him. "Yuh got it wrong this time, Sergeant. They ain't gone fer good. Thar's chuck thar in a cave in the cliff, an' a coupla blankets. Want me to foller 'em fer yuh?"

Mahon's face had lightened. "I would certainly like to know more about them. The inspector, too."

"Got a sorta hankerin' muhself that way," said Blue Pete, "so le's take a look."

They mounted and, with Blue Pete leading, struck through the trees. Blue Pete kept his eyes on the ground but appeared to find no difficulty. "They ain't bin tryin' to cover thur trail from here," he said.

"But where in the world are they making for?" asked the sergeant. "We're going back almost the way we came."

"Shure, shure! They bin payin' Pal a farewell call, I reckon, jes' to make sure he's comfy."

The trail led by a somewhat roundabout direction to the little ravine where Pal was feeding.

"Now where?" puzzled Mahon.

Blue Pete had been moving about. Now he pointed towards the north-west. "They gone off this way."

The sergeant's eyes opened widely. "But—but these marks weren't here when we were here. They've been made since."

"They come when we was findin' thur camp." The half-

breed whistled. "Mighta bin nasty fer somebody. I didn' think o' that."

"Do you think they knew we were here?"

"No chance. Ef they did they wudn' leave no trail like that. C'mon, we'll see whar they went. . . . Might's well go slow so's to give 'em a chance to git well ahead. . . . Looks like tha're makin' fer the prairie, goin' this way. I dunno wot fer. We gotta go keerful."

An hour later they broke through the northern edge of the forest. Blue Pete, riding thirty yards ahead, stopped, stared for a moment or two out into the open, then turned and beckoned. When the sergeant reached him he pointed.

"That's them."

Four tiny figures were visible, riding directly towards the north.

"Reckon we ain't got no further needta bother any more 'bout 'em. Th' inspector'll look after 'em. Thar're makin' fer the Hat."

"Oh yes," said Mahon. "I remember Slick said he'd like to pay a last visit to town, to give one last show."

He watched the diminishing figures with a feeling of intense relief. "That suits me. I'll leave the rest to the inspector. I'll ride in now. Are you coming?"

Blue Pete shook his head. "Naw. Thar ain't nothin' in town fer me. Yuh got it in yer hands now. Reckon I'll stick around."

CHAPTER XXVIII

ANOTHER SHOW IN TOWN

INSPECTOR BARKER was uneasy. It was Friday again, the day of his weekly report to the superintendent at Lethbridge. And still there was nothing to write about—nothing, at least, to make his report worth writing. The superintendent must have reams of such reports cluttering his files. Of course there was the roundup, and it hadn't gone well. But there was really nothing to say about that either.

He sat staring at the sheet he had half covered with unimportant and formal remarks. He had almost a regular phrasing now for the reports, and the superintendent must yawn while he read—if he ever did read.

He had hoped Mahon would be back with something to break the monotony of his stiff sentences. The roundup, he knew, was over—over, that is, except for the drive to the railway. Simmons could have looked after that—should have. No need for Mahon to waste his time on that, when he must know he was needed at the barracks.

Nagging at the indignation he felt against the sergeant, the inspector raised his eyes to the dirty window before him.

At that moment four cowboys came into sight around the corner of Toronto Street. They rode slowly along South Railway Street towards Main Street. Before the Commercial Hotel they stopped. But they did not dismount. Instead they formed a small circle, the leader in the centre.

Inspector Barker half rose from his chair. He recognized that flamboyant dress, and a strange excitement swept through him, bringing colour to his weather-beaten cheeks. In that moment he knew that all the time Slick Jordan had been in his thoughts, worrying him, irritating him. For it wasn't right that strangers should be strangers so long to the Mounted Police.

The little group faced the sidewalk that extended along only the south side of the street, the other side cut off by the wire fence along the railway. From the Commercial Hotel loungers poured, and from both directions along the street. It was as if a bell had been rung.

Slick did not keep his audience waiting. Releasing his feet from the stirrups, he stood on the saddle and commenced to twirl his rope. Graceful as a professional model, his lithe body bent and relaxed as the loop of the rope whirled about his head and all around the broncho and over his friends. He looked as steady as if on the ground, and Smarty never moved.

Inspector Barker pushed back his rickety chair, buttoned his tunic to the neck, took cap and riding-crop from their nails, and passed out into the hall.

"Tell the sergeant," he ordered the man at the desk, "if he returns, that I'm out watching the show on South Railway Street. He's to come and look me up. I want to talk to him right away."

As he passed through to the street he wondered why he wished so urgently to talk to Mahon.

He crossed the railway tracks. By that time the crowd had grown until it blocked the street, so that no one appeared to notice him, though this time he made no pretence of not noticing the crowd.

He was glad, as he stopped to watch, that he was unobserved. Slick had seemed not even to glance in his direction. Nevertheless he had scarcely found a place to stand at the edge of the crowd before the cowboy stopped his performance and laughed. It was the infectious laugh that always started the crowd laughing with him. Yet to the inspector it was irritating, and the more irritating because there was no reason for it.

Slick commenced to talk. "I tell you, mad Hatters, you're luckier than you know to have the Mounties to run things, instead of those figurehead sheriffs we have across the Border. It takes the Mounties to see that newcomers follow the straight and narrow. Over where I came from we meander about and nobody cares a hoot what or who we are, so long as we don't set fire to the city hall or rob a bank. But here? Why, right at this moment Inspector Barker is watching every move we

make, listening to every word I say, wondering who the devil we are and what we're doing here. And if we don't clear out in a hurry he'll have the answers."

He turned directly towards the inspector. "So now I'm going to talk out loud to him. I'm going to tell him not to waste his time. I'm confessing that there are incidents in my past I'd rather not talk about. That explains why we're clearing out, my boys and I, before it's necessary to do any more spying and speculating. I know the Mounties have the reputation of always getting their man, so we can't take chances." His eyes twinkled with laughter as he spoke. "We're not going to risk setting fire to your city hall or robbing a bank. Just the same, Inspector, we're flattered by your attentions. We hadn't the nerve to think we could furnish a performance worth so much of your valuable time—not for a second time, at least. Our repertoire is too limited for that, though we always aim to please—as someone has said before me. I was just going to say——"

He stopped and turned swiftly towards Toronto Street. A group of mounted cowboys, released from the roundup, came racing around the corner, shouting and singing. The inspector had heard them long before and had crowded back against the wall of a store where he was almost swallowed in the crowd.

The approaching cowboys saw the crowd only in time to stop their bronchos.

For a moment or two Slick looked them over in silence. On his face was a tantalizing, almost contemptuous smile.

"'And still they gazed,'" he teased, "'and still their wonder grew, that one small head could carry all he knew.'"

He shook his head reprovingly towards the cowboys. "You've missed the best part of the show, boys. I can't go through it again. If we weren't in such a hurry to leave——"

Two of the cowboys had been working their bronchos into the crowd and had reached Slick's little group. One of them raised his quirt and shook it.

"Yu'd best make yer leavin' more'n a hurry, Slick Jordan," he threatened. "We've had enough o' you an' yer mates here, more'n't enough. We don't like yer smart tricks, not about the Hat."

Something happened then so fast that even the inspector could scarcely have described it in detail, but in a moment Slick was on the ground, with Smarty lying before him, and a gun was in either hand.

Nevertheless he was laughing, a maddening, reckless, defiant laugh. "Thanks for the invitation," he said. "It happens I've seen you two before, the first time when you tried something out in the Hills, something that didn't quite work. That's why I'm not accepting your invitation. We're leaving at the time *we* choose. We're stubborn about things like that—and we haven't anything against a bit of excitement to remember Canada by. Perhaps you'd like to start something. I hope Inspector Barker'll forgive me for drawing on you, but he can take my word for what you tried to do—and when someone shakes a quirt in my face it's shooting time. If the inspector'll permit it, I tell you to go to hell."

Slick's companions had dismounted with him and were crowded about him, all with their hands on their guns.

Inspector Barker had made no move. The scene excited him, in a way pleased him mightily. There was, he knew, real danger to no one, least of all to Slick. He could and would look after himself—and there would be no gunplay beyond a show of that pair of guns.

Slick turned slowly to face the inspector.

The latter came to life and pushed through the crowd.

Slick made a grimace. "I'm sorry you're here, Inspector." He thrust the guns out of sight. "It looks as if some of your local punchers need a lesson, and I wouldn't charge a thing for giving it. It wouldn't be any use, I suppose, to beg you to turn your back—or go just around the corner. I think we can settle this in a few seconds. I love these little interruptions."

The new arrivals had seen the inspector, had turned hastily about and were dashing back towards Toronto Street, the crowd scattering before them.

Inspector Barker moved towards Slick, the way opening for him. There was a grim look on his face. He stopped beside Smarty, who still lay on his side, and frowned down on him.

"Get him up," he ordered.

Slick flushed, but he snapped his fingers and Smarty scrambled to his feet and stood shaking himself. The elaborate trappings of the saddle rattled metallicly.

"Get on," the inspector ordered, and Slick, after a moment's hesitation, obeyed.

"You're a stranger in these parts, Slick Jordan"—the inspector's voice rang over the street—"and you're making too much trouble. We have enough of our own without importing it. You were prepared to protect yourself, I know, and you can't be blamed very much for that. But you've made a nuisance of yourself, if only by blocking traffic on the street. It isn't necessary for me to place the blame for starting the trouble I've heard of, but you're in the wrong place to be mixed in it in any way."

He faced the crowd and swung a commanding arm. "Get out of this, all of you. Get off the roadway. The entertainment is over. There'll be no more. They're leaving town right away."

Sergeant Mahon came riding around the corner, and the inspector turned to him. "Sergeant, you'll see that these men get out of town, and right away."

Slick's teeth came together, and an angry glare flashed in his eyes. His lips parted. "We've done nothing——"

"Don't argue," snapped the inspector. "You've caused a lot of trouble. We can do without your entertainment—in the interests of peace. We don't know why you're here, and we haven't time to find out. This is no place for loafers. Your work at the roundup is over. Now get out." He stood with his fists on his hips. "I don't usually wait to be obeyed."

Slick had sense enough to accept the situation. With a shrug he turned Smarty away. Then he swung in the saddle and, with the tantalizing laugh that made the inspector want to shoot him, he elaborately raised his enormous sombrero to the crowd.

"Adieu, kind friends!" he laughed. "I almost said 'au revoir,' but something tells me the inspector doesn't wish us back. We'll retire to a country where we're more appreciated—and there's nothing more formidable than a sheriff to keep us straight. But it's been nice meeting you." He winked at

the inspector. "And you, too, Inspector. I bear you no ill-will. In fact every hour I find my admiration for the Mounted Police growing. That's why I go to live my life where they don't block my way."

He started back towards Toronto Street, but the inspector stopped him with a sharp order. He pointed towards Main Street. "You're going this way. It'll give you a better chance of avoiding trouble. Sergeant Mahon will see you out of town."

Slick pouted. "Inspector, you take the zip out of life. I had hoped . . . but the sergeant would have interfered . . . and those nasty punchers will not get their lesson. One final splash of excitement would have left such a pleasant memory of Medicine Hat."

He wheeled Smarty about on his hind legs and set off towards Main Street, followed by his companions. Sergeant Mahon was close behind.

A city policeman hustled around the corner and looked about frowningly for someone on whom to display his authority. "What's the trouble, Inspector?" he asked.

"No trouble whatever, chief." The inspector's face was like a mask. "Thanks for turning up when you did. I might have needed you. I saw the traffic block, and I saved you the trouble of hurrying. By the way, I don't think either of us will be troubled further with those new cowboys Jim Allen engaged for the roundup."

As it turned out it might not have been as simple as that.

CHAPTER XXIX

BLUE PETE FINDS THE ANSWER

AT THE top of the slope, well within the forest, Blue Pete remained for a long time, watching the figure of his friend grow smaller and smaller. When the sergeant disappeared in a distant coulee, riding fast, as if to overtake Slick, the half-breed turned back into the trees. The faint trail left by Slick and his friends was apparent enough, and he shook his head at it. He found it difficult to believe that, after all the trouble, Slick would defy local feeling by returning to Medicine Hat. And yet, he decided, it was like him, and the thought brought a scowl to his swarthy face.

He wondered if there could have been a mistake. There was no certainty that the four distant figures he and the sergeant had seen were really Slick and his friends, and he turned aside and rode for almost a mile to the east, just within the trees, examining the ground carefully as he went. Stopping at last, he looked about to place himself, then he turned back and picked up the trail once more.

Something puzzled him, and he left the trail and set off straight through the Hills towards the west until he reached the end of the forest. Swinging then towards the south-east, he cut back into the shadows. He was not satisfied. Pal, Tully Mason's broncho, could be ignored for the time being; it would be there any time he wished to find it.

Presently he picked up the trail he and Mahon had followed, but it interested him no longer, and he turned from it towards the south. He moved more swiftly now, for the sun was sinking. At the southern edge of the Hills he turned east, keeping outside the trees where he could see more easily if anything had passed that way.

On and on he rode, impatiently watching the waning light.

Suddenly he pulled in. Before him were unmistakable signs of passing cattle, some old and difficult to time, others comparatively fresh; but all followed the same route.

The frown that had gathered earlier on his forehead deepened, and with it a new excitement flashed in his crooked eyes. Away over the prairie towards the Border he stared for a time, moving uneasily about in the saddle. Not a sign of life was visible, and he dismounted and examined the marks more closely.

Every mark led into the Hills.

For a time he followed into the trees. He estimated that he must have come at least ten miles from the western end of the Hills. The border of Saskatchewan would not be far away, but that meant nothing to him. What did matter was that he had reached a part of the Hills where he had seldom been before, and his excitement increased as the trail continued eastward.

In the unfamiliar district he did not dare go farther in the waning light. Accordingly he dismounted, unsaddled, and turned Whiskers loose. She would find food and water and return to rest near him. Choosing the highest spot nearby, he threw himself down.

He was more tired than he supposed, and he slept soundly—so soundly that the sun was well up by the time he was conscious of Whiskers nosing at him impatiently.

He mounted immediately, upbraiding himself for having wasted so much time. He did not wish to be late. Late for what? He asked it of himself and had no answer, yet the feeling was there. He found the trail again and followed it. Eastward, always eastward it continued. Twice he came on evidence that the cattle had been allowed to stop and feed, and at each resting place were ashes of dead fires that had been carefully stamped out and scattered.

Afternoon came, and still he moved eastward. But he felt better now, less impatient, for the signs were fresher.

He noticed how far he had come to the east, and he wondered if he should not have continued to look for tracks along the southern edge of the Hills. Perhaps the cattle had been driven across the Border, leaving the Hills beyond the point

where he had stopped. He had not thought of that before, and as the hours passed his worry increased. If he was too late—if the cattle had already gone! Would he dare confess to the sergeant? All along he had been suspicious of Slick, and if the cattle were gone it was due to his own carelessness. He knew that the part of the story they had sought was revealed in the herd whose trail he followed.

Then he knew that he had not come too late. Whiskers knew it first and in her way informed him. They had heard no sound, yet they were certain that cattle were not far away. It may have been an odour too subtle for other noses, or it may have been an instinct of a lifetime among cattle. They knew, and that was enough. Whiskers' ears pointed stiffly forward, and her nostrils dilated with excitement. She moved more cautiously, and in her manner was a new nervousness.

Blue Pete grinned. "Shure, ole gal. Yuh know tha're thar, same's I do. Reckon we come to th' end o' the trail." The words thinned to a mere whisper, and he turned into a thicket and dismounted.

"Th' end—o' the trail," he repeated, "an' yit 'tain't th' end. Not yit. . . . An' all the time I was hopin' . . . hopin'——" He sighed, and his face wrinkled unhappily. "Gotta go through 'th it now, ole gal, an' I don' like it none." He stood for a time, absent-mindedly patting the pinto's neck as she bent her head to nibble at his chaps. "'Tain't wot we wanted, ole gal, not ef it's wot it looks like now. Reckon we bes' wait 'n' see. I hope 'tain't."

He crept from the thicket, though he knew no human life was near. In some strange way he felt as if he was intruding on someone's privacy. He went forward. He knew almost to the yard where the cattle were, though he could still hear nothing.

Where he was the sun shone brilliantly through the foliage, and he moved aside into the shadows. Now and then as he advanced he stopped to listen, holding his breath. But he could hear nothing.

Sighing, he shook his head. For he was not happy.

A steep bank dropped away before him, but for a few moments he would not let himself look over it.

It was one of the hundreds of ravines that furrowed the Hills, and though he had never been there he knew what it would look like. His ears told him of a gurgling stream—and then came a rustle of movement.

A herd was there in the hollow. Swiftly he ran his eyes over them as they lay in the shadows of the opposite slope to escape the heat of the afternoon sun. Though he did not consciously count them he knew the exact number—thirty-eight of the finest steers he had ever seen in a single roundup. Whoever had selected them knew cattle.

Though every sense told him there was no danger, he moved cautiously along the edge of the ravine. He saw where horses had been, and twice he kneeled on the ground to examine hoofmarks. Each time he rose with a deeper worry in his face.

It was a long ravine, and by the time he had crossed it far above the herd and returned an hour had passed. Thinking deeply, he returned to where he had left Whiskers.

He seemed to read a question in her eyes, for he nodded. "Shure, shure. It's wot we thought . . . an' didn' want. Tha're thar. Bes' bunch o' beef I ever seen. He's a durn good puncher." He said the last few words almost defensively.

He seated himself on a fallen tree, his chin resting in his hands, and glowered at the ground.

He sighed. "But we gotta go through 'th it now, ole gal," he declared; as if stiffening his own decision.

Absent-mindedly he set off back towards the cattle, but after a few steps returned and mounted. With Whiskers he rode down into the ravine. The cattle watched him coming, but with no concern, though a few rose languidly as he neared them. Slowly he rode among them, making each rise so that he could read the brand.

What he read appeared to make him more unhappy still, for his head shook again and again. And as he concealed the pinto once more he muttered: "Durned if I don't wish I hadn' found 'em."

He returned to the top of the bank and lay down. From the spot he had chosen the bank fell sharply away, and a thick cluster of bushes entirely concealed him. For the rest of the

day he remained, often lying on his back, his hands beneath his head, staring at the darkening sky through the leaves.

Then darkness blotted out detail. With the deepening of the shadows restlessness seized the cattle, as it always did at that hour. Occasionally a lazy, contented low lifted to him, then the grunting and sighing of comfortable repose as they settled down for the night.

He slept little. He was restless and unhappy. And yet through his discomfort shot a gleam of satisfaction. He had been suspicious, a sort of instinct, and the instinct had not deceived him. So much depended on that that he could not bear to have it let him down.

As the hours passed he wondered if things were as they seemed, if it might not be that a mistake had been made.

Morning came. The sun rose. Hour passed into hour.

It was ten o'clock when someone rode up from the northwest. He came stealthily, looking about him, examining the ground. At intervals he stopped and seemed to listen. A rustler, that, with the inbred caution of the chronic law-breaker. As he neared the ravine he turned abruptly and without apparent reason skirted along so close to where the half-breed lay that the latter held his breath and rested a hand on his .45.

Once the rustler swung away towards the thicket where Whiskers was concealed, and Blue Pete raised himself on his elbows and pointed his rifle. Whiskers, he knew, would not betray him—but there was that other broncho! If it should sense the presence of the pinto! The nearness of the cattle, however, would confuse in its rider's mind any signal it gave.

The broncho did whinny, and instantly the man in the saddle stopped and searched the forest about him with his eyes. He evidently saw nothing suspicious, and after a few moments he passed along, and Blue Pete could see him smile, as if ashamed of his nervousness. Then he made directly for the ravine where the cattle fed.

Blue Pete did not smile. For the rustler was Dave, one of Slick Jordan's friends.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CAPTURE

DAVE REACHED the top of the bank and looked down into the ravine, running his eye over the herd. And a satisfied smile showed on his tanned cheeks. Then he turned and rode back the way he had come.

When he was gone Blue Pete went to the pinto. "Mighty cunnin', them lads," he told her. "They ain't takin' no chances. Slick sent him ahead, to see the way was clear. You 'n' me we ain't takin' no chances neither, so I'll take yuh further to the south, so they won't ride in on yuh. Tha're comin' from the north-west. I do' want the bronchos to know yuh're here."

He led Whiskers out and found another hiding-place. As he turned to leave her, a sound from the forest brought his head up with a jerk.

"Tha're comin'," he whispered. "They won't run on yuh here, not likely. 'Sides yuh're handier, 'case I need yuh in a hurry. That Smarty, he's fast. Slick thinks he's faster'n you. Mebbe we'll see now."

He hurried away. He had been in hiding only a couple of minutes when he knew they were near. They were working through the trees, and coming with little effort to conceal their approach. The four of them were there, Smarty prancing along in front.

As they came nearer, Slick stopped. The others drew in behind him and waited. Slick appeared to be thinking—or was he listening?

The half-breed watched every movement, trying to read what was in the cowboy's mind. He was afraid of Slick—afraid that what had failed to arouse suspicions in Dave's mind would not fail with Dave's leader. There were so many things to warn him.

Slick must have felt or seen the warnings, for he swung away to the south towards where Whiskers was concealed. There he stopped. A thicket cut him off from Blue Pete's view so that the half-breed waited, nervous and fearing the worst. But he dare not change his position, for the other three were within sight.

Suddenly they sent their bronchos ahead. Slick must have given them a signal, and Blue Pete strained to see or hear.

He had not long to wait. There came the pound of retreating hoofs, and for a moment the three could be seen scattering towards the south as fast as they could ride through the trees.

He rose and set off on the run to Whiskers.

A rifle shot crashed through the forest, and a bullet cut through the rim of his hat. Almost with the sound he had dropped to hands and knees, but he knew that would not have saved him. Concealed in that position by the growth about him, he crept along.

He did not know where Slick was, and, unable to restrain himself, he raised his head to look. It gave him a fleeting glimpse of Slick. He had moved to the west while his comrades escaped. A moment later the trees concealed him.

Risking much in his hurry to get to Whiskers, Blue Pete ran forward. And once more Slick was in sight. He had dismounted, and his rifle was at his shoulder.

There was no time to escape now the bullet Blue Pete knew was coming, and he had to take the chance. He could almost feel it, and all he could do was hope it would not disable him.

But the bullet did not come; Slick did not shoot. Instead, he disappeared. A moment later came the sound of Smarty rushing away into the forest.

The chase was on. It did not need the mocking laugh that came back to him to convince Blue Pete of that.

His first thought was to cut Slick off from the south where his companions had gone. In that direction, with any kind of a start, he might reach the Border and escape. If only he could get around him and force him to the north they would presently reach the open prairie—and the test of the two bronchos.

That was it—the test. Whiskers must be proven. In those first moments Slick himself was merely an incident in the affair,

the rider who had to be convinced. Of the result of the test he had no fear. In Whiskers' speed and endurance he had complete confidence. Besides, Smarty must have come a long way and be anything but fresh. He was sorry for that; he wanted to show Slick, to prove Whiskers, with everything equal.

His thoughts broke from that and remained fixed on Slick. The cowboy was racing away to the north all right; there was no question about that. And it was deliberate—for now his companions would easily escape.

He could hear Smarty plainly enough, yet he felt certain that would not continue. When he could hear nothing—that was the time to be on guard. It would mean that Slick was lying in wait for him.

Cutting through the excitement of the chase came a new discomfort. Ever in his mind remained that last picture of Slick—standing with rifle aimed and he himself helpless. Yet Slick had not pulled the trigger!

He tried to forget it. He knew he had to forget it in the task before him. Behind him were thirty-eight of the choicest steers of the roundup, and the rustler who had thought to run them across the Border was there before him.

Smarty could still be heard, always making straight for the north. Slick was willing to stake his life on the broncho's speed, with the safety of his friends his one concern. It was like him.

For the first few moments Smarty had gained a little, for Blue Pete rode cautiously, foreseeing an ambush. So long as he could hear Smarty, and he kept to the north——

Then the sounds ceased. Instantly the half-breed pulled in. For a few moments he listened to make sure, edging behind a tree. How far Slick had been in front of him he could not be certain, but until he had thought things out he dare not go on.

He dismounted. At a signal Whiskers lay flat on the ground, and the half-breed started forward, dodging from tree to tree.

He felt better now. Things had come to a head. No longer was there indecision; he knew exactly what he had to do. Whiskers, too, he figured he had left in safety. That was im-

portant, not alone for Whiskers' sake but for his own. Without the pinto, Slick could laugh at him. And the bullet he had withheld when Blue Pete was a certain victim would be used readily enough against the pinto. Shooting a mount was always the safest means of escape for a rustler.

Cautiously Blue Pete crept away to the right. Until he knew where Slick lay waiting for him he dare not go farther towards where he had heard Smarty last. If he could work around him, perhaps cutting him off from his broncho . . .

Everything was quiet now. The stillness in the forest, after the recent excitement, made his ears ring. It was nerve-tingling stillness, and he held his breath to listen—and all he heard was the throbbing in his own ears.

There was real danger. Slick had refused once to take advantage of him when he had been reckless, but now things were different. It was one or the other. Slick's life was at stake—or at the best his liberty. He dare not permit himself to be captured.

He moved cautiously forward. He was on hands and knees, inching along, straining to hear. If only he could have had Whiskers with him! Whiskers always knew when an enemy was near. He remembered the direction in which he had heard Smarty last, but he could not rely on that. Slick would never remain there, if only to protect his broncho.

Farther and farther to the right he worked his way, utilizing every cover, sometimes gliding along flat on the ground when cover was lacking.

He thought of Whiskers then. He dare not go too far from her. Slick was clever enough to take advantage of that.

A sense of imminent peril sent him flat against the ground. There he lay motionless for several seconds, holding his breath. He could hear nothing, but he knew he dare not be careless, and he squirmed behind a bush and cautiously raised his head.

He could see Slick then. The cowboy lay behind a large tree only a few yards to his left. And he was looking towards the south.

An easy target—but that was not what Blue Pete wanted. With a cold smile he slid away to get directly behind his victim.

Presently he looked straight into the cowboy's back. For a time he lay there. With Slick helpless before him he felt less happy about it. Now that the keenest of the tension was over he almost wished Slick had kept on running.

The cowboy was plainly worried. Recklessly he peered around the tree in the direction from which he thought Blue Pete would come. He appeared to be listening, and his eyes commenced to dart from side to side. He did not think of looking behind.

A sudden snort almost from his back brought Blue Pete to his feet. Smarty had been there and had given his master warning. But that was not all. Blowing fury and defiance, the broncho charged, and the half-breed had to leap behind a tree.

So unexpected was it that Slick was slow in interpreting the sounds, and by the time he realized what was happening Blue Pete had him covered.

"Reckon yuh bes' call him off, Slick," he warned, jerking a thumb towards Smarty who was circling the tree to get at him. "I'd hate to shoot him, but thar ain't nothin' else to do."

Slick gave a sharp order, and the broncho stopped and looked hesitantly from one to the other.

"Drop the rifle, Slick—an' the gats."

The rifle fell from the cowboy's hands and he drew his two guns.

"No, don't hand 'em over. Drop 'em." Many a time Blue Pete had shot himself free by whirling his .45 around on the trigger guard as he made to hand the gun over, butt first. He shook his head reprovingly. "Yuh shuda kep' on. Yuh wanted to see ef Smarty cud outrun Whiskers, an' then yuh tried to ambush me. Silly, that. I ain't no tenderfoot at that game. . . . But, come to think of it, 'twudn' bin fair, 'cause Smarty's come a long way today, an' Whiskers is fresh. Smarty wudn' had a chance."

Slick smiled contemptuously. "That's what you think."

"I ain't thinkin' nothin'. I know. When we race I want it to be fair. But," with a worried frown, "that ain't goin' to be now, 'cause I gotta take yuh in."

As the half-breed picked up the guns Slick had dropped, the latter said, "You mean you're going to hand me over to the Mounties?"

"Thar ain't nobody else to hand yuh to."

Slick eyed him inquiringly for a long moment, then he sighed. "You found the cows."

The half-breed nodded.

"It isn't a large bunch, Pete. I might have had any number more."

"But yuh got the fat 'uns."

Slick laughed. "Does that surprise you? I know cows. . . . By the way, there isn't a 3-Bar-Y among them."

"I seen that."

"Nor a T-Inverted R."

"I seen that, too, an' I wondered."

"That's another silly thing." Slick shrugged. "Somehow it didn't fit into the picture to rob my own employer—or my friends' employer . . . in spite of his foreman." He looked away to the south and tilted his head to listen. Then he smiled. "At any rate you'll only get me. I got the boys into this, so I had to get them out of it. . . . They'll miss me."

He was so calm about it, so unperturbed by the picture of what lay before him, that it increased Blue Pete's misery. He knew better than his captive what lay before the rustler, and it was not a pleasing picture. If only Slick had escaped when he had the chance! . . . If only the sergeant weren't mixed up in the affair! He tossed that thought aside; he must go on with it now.

"Git into the saddle," he ordered. "We're goin' out, an' none o' yer smart tricks er I gotta shoot. I do' wanta hurt yuh."

Slick must have found something amusing about it, for he was laughing as he climbed on Smarty's back. "Funny feeling, that, isn't it? I've had it. I had it not so long ago about you. It looks foolish now." He sighed. "You win."

Blue Pete raised his eyes to the sky. He had lost track of time, but he knew it was not late—not even noon. Yet the sky had strangely darkened towards the west. An uneasy feeling swept over him, and it had nothing to do with Slick

that he could trace. It was as if everything was somehow going wrong. He wanted desperately to get away—to get out of the forest and on the open prairie.

“Git goin’,” he ordered.

Without a word more they set off through the trees towards the north-west. Blue Pete, riding behind, now and then tapped Smarty to hurry him. A driving, anxious, urgent feeling made him more uneasy than ever. He wondered.

As they neared the edge of the forest, Blue Pete raised himself suddenly in the saddle and sniffed at the air.

“Prairie fire!” he shouted. “Go on!”

CHAPTER XXXI

PAYING A DEBT

THE PRAIRIE fire that followed that year so closely on the heels of the beef roundup is still talked about among old-timers in the Canadian West. There had been many before it, some destructive of stock and now and then of human life, but the fire that year that swept from west to east was fiercest of all and most threatening before it was stopped. And yet there was little loss of life, even among the herds, since the best of the steers were already safely on their way to the railway at Dunmore Junction. Luck was with the ranchers.

The smell of smoke was unmistakable to both of them now, though the fire was many miles still to the west. The forest, even as they reached the edge, was almost as dark as night. The dirty black cloud that had darkened the sky reached now almost over their heads, driven by the wind created by the fire itself. A weird silence had fallen over the prairie, and even in the forest life appeared to wait, breathless.

As Blue Pete stared towards the west he gasped. "It's a big 'un," he said. "It'll be a hard fight. Most o' the boys is still on the drive, an' that fire'll need 'em all. Reckon the Mounties is linin' 'em up in town right now an' gittin' ready to run 'em out."

It was a terrifying scene. Far to the west a great brown cloud, solid as a wall, reared itself to the sky, leaning towards them. From the height where they watched they could see the racing flames at the base, some lurid red, some appearing black as they licked at the dead grass.

And here towards them, racing for their lives before the flames, came a wild surge of animal life—a few cattle and hundreds of coyotes, badgers, and prairie dogs.

The half-breed sat tense in the saddle, breathing heavily. His fists were clenched and his face worked. It was every

man's duty to fight a prairie fire . . . but what about him? What should he do? A rustler—a prisoner? . . . Slick Jordan!

Suddenly his arm reached out towards the fire, and Whiskers shot forward. Smarty, the moment the pinto reached his shoulder, jerked free and followed. But the half-breed had forgotten his prisoner. Before him was work to do, work that called him from anything he might have thought to do.

He remembered only when the sound of hoofs behind him told him that Slick, too, had heard the call. Side by side for a time the two bronchos raced along, then Smarty commenced to pull away. But Blue Pete reached out and caught a rein.

"Bes' go a bit easy, Slick," he advised. "Never know how bad we might need to force 'em later, an' we'll need 'em fresh. We won't be much use ef our broncs are winded."

But Slick had caught the fever, and he jerked the rein free. "You can't keep up, that's the trouble."

Blue Pete laughed. "Whiskers ain' half out yit. We're goin' to fight a fire, not jes' to race. Thar ain't nothin' to show off 'bout now."

Slick's face reddened and he pulled Smarty in. "You're right, Pete: I'm a show-off at times. Smarty and I have so often wondered about Whiskers that we saw our chance to test it." He grinned, the attractive grin that won friends and maddened enemies. "I'm pretty much of a fool. I could have skipped back there into the Hills. I could always do so many things that I can't bring myself to do—and sometimes I pay for it . . . like now. But there's Smarty, and Smarty wants to know where the pinto stands." He laughed again in an apologetic way.

"Yuh think a lot o' Smarty," said the half-breed.

"It would break my heart to have him beaten. We've been through so much together, and he's never let me down. He's the one friend I can trust under any condition."

They had been riding fast and had come nearer the fire. They had kept to the southern edge and now they could see the men fighting the fire at both sides. To try to stop it by a frontal attack, except with ploughed fire-guards, would be worse than useless, and dangerous, for the flames raced at the speed of a horse. The smoke was about them now, distorting

what little they could see. The wind created by the flames was so strong that it almost took their breath as they rode into it.

Slick, slightly ahead, turned twice as if to speak but was silent. The third time he said: "There's a pretty fine bronc back there in the Hills. It's Pal, Tully Mason's horse. I'd hate to think of it starving or freezing to death . . . or it might fall to the wolves. I got it that night Tully thought to attack our camp. You'll be able to find it."

Blue Pete grunted. "I hev. I know whar 'tis. So does the sergeant."

"You told him?"

"He found it himself."

Slick shook his head wonderingly. "More and more I'm learning that there are other smart people in the world. Those Mounties are all right. They're all I've heard of them and more. If we had something like them on our side of the Border we'd have less lawlessness." He raised his face and laughed up at the sky. "Say, that's a confession, isn't it? I could say more, but that's enough for one outburst or you'll think I'm showing-off again. Say, hadn't we better edge over a little more this way? The smoke is going to blind us."

Several cattle had rushed past them on their left, and even the coyotes, faster and more enduring, and probably warned earlier, paid no attention to them. All along the line of flames the smaller animals were bursting their hearts out to escape—and often failing, disappearing into that scarlet and black cloud.

The roar and crackle were loud now, and the flames were out of control, though cowboys and ranchers were working furiously along the borders, here and there assisted by ploughed fire-guards surrounding ranch-houses and meadows kept for home pasturage.

Neither broncho showed signs of fatigue, though Smarty's head jerked now and then and flecks of perspiration floated back as the wind tore them free.

Suddenly Blue Pete pulled in and pointed. "Thar's a ranch over thar, an' the fire's goin' to git it 'less we kin do suthin'. It's the T-Inverted R." He raised himself in the saddle.

"Cowboys fightin' thar. Thar'll be fire-guards around the buildin's, but it'll need more'n that."

He ran his eye along the near border of the fire. Half a dozen cowboys raced along there, dragging dead steers that had been cut open to lie flat along the ground. One had a network of chains at the end of a long rope, and a few beat at the flames with branches.

The half-breed made up his mind quickly. Turning Whiskers, he raced directly across the prairie before the oncoming flames, making for a group fighting desperately about the ranch buildings of the T-Inverted R.

Slick was close behind. No longer were they captor and captive; neither so much as thought of it.

The fire had been narrowed materially by the fighters, but it did not appear possible to save the ranch buildings. The smoke about them sometimes concealed them from one another, so that much of their work was wasted and unorganized. Blue Pete eyed the approaching flames as he rode. He wondered if he had taken too great a risk, and to no purpose.

They emerged suddenly in clearer air about the ranch buildings. Three cowboys, unrecognizable through the soot on their faces, had given up hope of saving the buildings and were desperately releasing bronchos and cattle from the corrals.

The fire was still several hundred yards away, and for just a moment Blue Pete studied the situation. Then he leaped from the saddle and raced towards the fire. A double line of fire-guards had been ploughed as usual about the buildings, spaced about fifteen yards apart. As he ran towards them he drew a box of matches from his pocket, and, leaping the nearer fire-guard, he clutched up a handful of the dry grass and lit it. With this he ran along the inside of the further guard, setting fire to the grass. In the wind it quickly roared into a long line of flame. But by the time it reached the inner guard it had not the power to leap it, and it died out, leaving a strip of burned grass before the larger fire rushing towards it from the west.

The ranch buildings would probably be safe now, since there were no embers to blow about. But the fire had already crept along the sides towards the stable, and the cowboys watched it

anxiously, for the old fire-guard had been neglected and grass had grown over it.

Two of the men set off madly towards the stable.

Blue Pete shouted to them: "Let it go. Yuh can't save it now."

The cowboys called something at him and pointed towards the stable. Suddenly he remembered Slick and looked around. He was nowhere in sight.

"Whar is he?" he shouted. A sudden panic seized him, for Smarty was there beside Whiskers, trembling, nostrils dilated, staring at the flames that had already reached the stable.

One of the cowboys ran to the half-breed. "He's in there," he shouted. "Tully's in there. He went to turn the bronchos loose. He ain't come out." Flames raged over the building. "My God," he shrilled, covering his eyes, "he's done for!"

And then through the flames and the smoke a man staggered. He was too small for Tully Mason, and he carried over his shoulders a much larger man—Slick Jordan and Tully.

As Slick crossed the fireguard and sank panting to the ground, Blue Pete ran to him. Smarty, too, hurried up and licked his master's face, and Slick smiled adoringly up at the broncho. Then he turned to the unconscious man he had laid on the grass.

"He'll be all right," he said. "He was down, but it was only the smoke and the hot air, I think. It nearly got me too. I saw him go in and I knew he hadn't a chance."

Blue Pete stared from one to the other. A slight smile twisted Slick's blackened face. Tully lay gasping for breath. Slick lifted the foreman's head against his knees.

Two of Tully's men eased him free, laid him down, and commenced to fan him. He was coming to his senses rapidly. Slick rose and rested an arm across Smarty's back. He turned to Blue Pete. "Shall we go now?" he suggested.

CHAPTER XXXII

DEFEAT—OR VICTORY?

BLUE PETE stared at him. Some sort of emotion worked on his dark face. Over his forehead flickered lines of worry and uncertainty, and his crooked eyes presently darted away and dropped. Suddenly he could not look into the face of the rustler he was taking in to hand over to the Mounted Police. He shivered and shook his head in a bewildered way. Then, awkward and hesitant, he started towards Whiskers. His heart was heavy. He could not face the scene that flashed through his mind—Slick Jordan, the rustler, standing before Inspector Barker and facing years of imprisonment.

The sound of swiftly moving hoofs brought him about. Slick was racing away across the blackened prairie towards the Hills. Bent low over the saddle, the cowboy looked back and beckoned. This was the race at last, the test that would either break his heart or set him free.

The blood leaped in the half-breed's veins. He accepted the challenge. This was different. One thing to take a submissive Slick in after what he had just done, another to run him down when he tried to escape—and in the capture to prove Whiskers. A sharp whistle brought the pinto on the run, and then they were off. The race was on.

He felt exhilarated, excited, even happy. This was it. It was up to Whiskers now, and that was all that mattered. He had no doubt of the outcome, but it would be a tough test. But the pinto had never failed him; she would never fail him now when so much was at stake.

Through a half-mile of choking, blinding soot they raced. No need to direct the pinto; she knew what was required of her. Blue Pete bent low, eyes closed, a hand over his nose.

Out into the clearer air beyond, where the fire had not been, they shot. And now at last he could see. Smarty had a good four hundred yards' start.

The half-breed leaned well forward. "We gotta ketch him, ole gal, we jes' gotta. We gotta show him yuh kin do it. Thar ain't no steel-dust bronc ner anythin' else too good fer yuh." Time after time he repeated it . . . yet each time with less vehemence.

Four hundred yards of start—and the Hills were only a couple of miles away. It was hopeless, and Blue Pete knew it. He left direction to the pinto and would not let himself look.

Then he became aware that Whiskers had shifted direction and was running towards the west, not towards the Hills. He raised his head. Slick had turned and was racing along parallel to the refuge so easily within reach. And Blue Pete knew: it was not escape that was in Slick's mind but the race, the test of speed and endurance. It had to be settled; he had to know.

Many yards might have been saved by cutting across the angle of Slick's route, but he had to be fair, just as Slick was, and he swung Whiskers back and followed around the full length of the angle. To him, too, it was a test he had longed for.

He dropped his face again. He would leave it to Whiskers. He could not contemplate the tragedy that awaited—either him or Slick. He could not face the horror, the grief in Slick's face that would be there when Whiskers overtook him.

Not once did he think of using his rifle.

For a mile the race continued. Blue Pete raised his head. Ah, there was no doubt of it—Whiskers was gaining.

At that moment Slick looked back. And even at that distance incredulity and dismay seemed to be visible in his face.

The half-breed smiled. He drew a long breath. He whispered to Whiskers' flickering ears: "Easy, ole gal, easy a bit. I knew yuh cud do it, an' that's all we wanted to know. You proved yuh cud beat anythin' in the West er that came to it, an' yuh've beat the best from 'cross the Border now. Yuh know how I'd feel ef yuh hadn' done it. Wal, that's how Slick'll feel ef yuh don't ease up a bit. He thinks 'most as

much o' Smarty 's I do o' you, so le's not hurt him like we cud. He ain't rustlin' no cows now. Them cows'll be thar when we want to find 'em—an' Tully's bronc. . . . An' Slick won't never come back. You 'n' me we'll let him go, eh, ole gal?"

The distance between the racing bronchos slowly widened. And the last Blue Pete saw of Slick Jordan was when, convinced at last that Smarty had won the test, the cowboy rode up the slope and vanished into the forest. At the edge of the trees he stopped, waved, and the half-breed could almost see that sweet smile on the handsome face. Waving both hands, Slick raised them over his head and clasped them together, a symbol of victory. Then he swept off his sombrero and bowed—and was gone.

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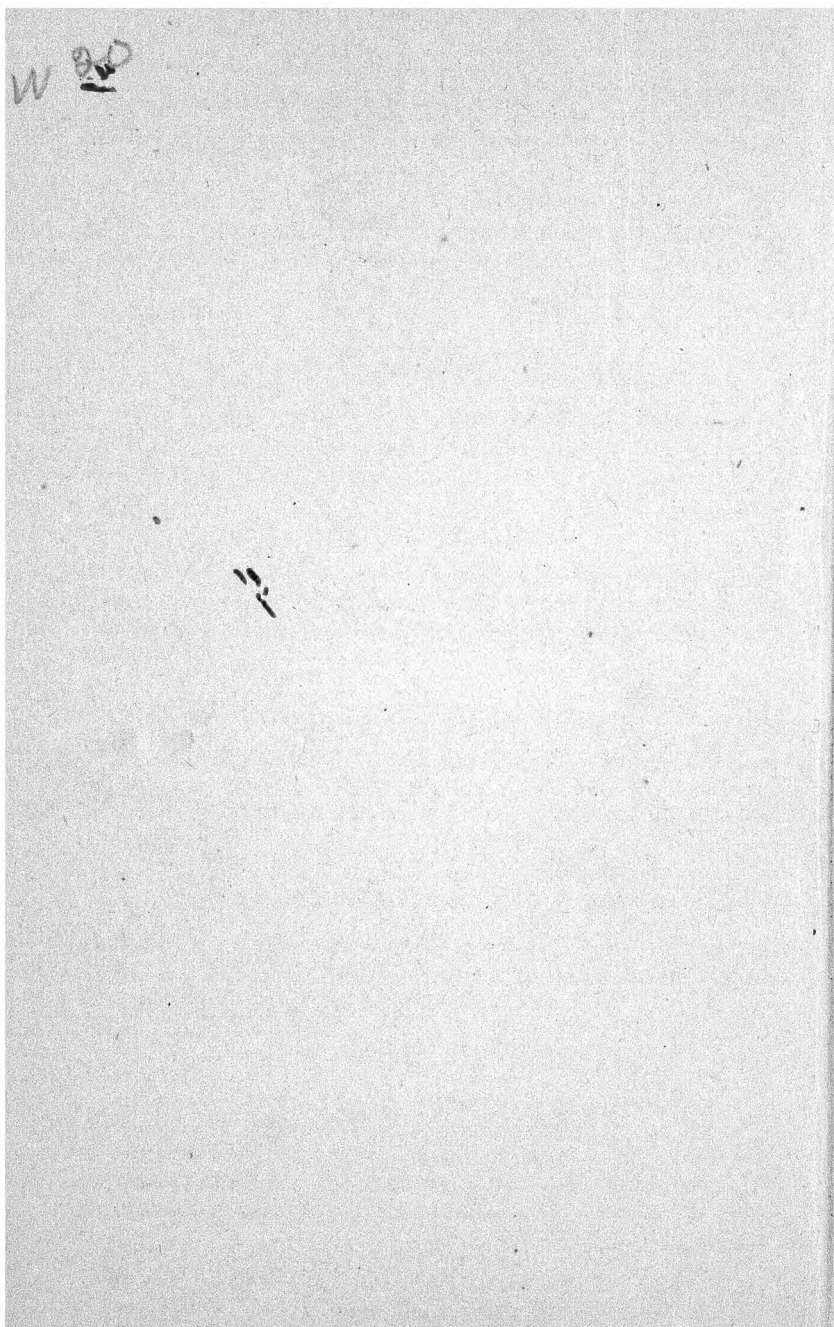
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